COWBOY-LIFE ROMANCES
Lariat
STORY MAGAZINE
MAY 1948
20c
"COFFIN 13 IS MY BRAND"
by Walker A. Tompkins
Lady Wyoming -GUN "POISON!"
A full-length novel of love and bullets
by
DEE LINFORD

Missing Page

Inside front cover

Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE

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A Complete Booklength Western Novel

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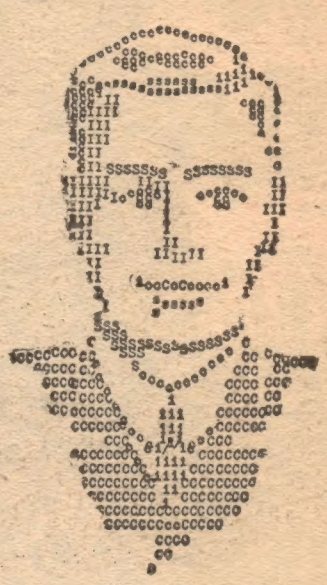

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Spawn of the Wild Bunch

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

"You got Carnahan blood, son, and it'll bring you back to the Owlhoot—git you a killer-brand—no matter how fast or far you ride," was the Ace-of-Death warning that young Pat Carney took with him as he sloped out of the Badlands.

THE BUZZING whine of carbine lead stopped the little speech that would have changed all of Pat Carney's future. He had already uttered the first words of what he had so carefully rehearsed, hoping pretty Rita O'Riley would understand and, contrary to that, wishing wildly that the hot mixed Irish-Spanish strain of her blood would stir her to anger and fight his decision.

Reager fired, but he couldn't dodge Pat's charging Morgan.

"It's thisaway, Rita," he had begun, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead along the moonlit mountain bench—away from Rita's disturbing beauty. "I done the wrongful thing in not puttin' all my cards on the table right off. I ain't no better than any other coyote reppin' himself to be what he ain't. First off, my name ain't Carney—"

Pat wasn't looking at the slender girl riding so close that the knee of her trim buckskin breeches was touching his bearskin chaps. But he didn't have to see her small, well poised head with its wealth of clustering black curls or her pretty, oval face to know that her sharply contrasting blue eyes were probably darkening with the smoke of rising resentment.

Pat swallowed his dry tongue on the name "Carney." He hadn't missed the sudden slowing of the girl's white-stockinged palomino. "What's that you say," Rita inquired eagerly.

He choked some, for it would be plain, undiluted hell for him when he'd had his say-so. Dammit! Why did he have to be honest? He had been sired by the wrong breed. He should have heeded the wise, hard words of his Owlhoot dad, tough old Matt Carnahan.

"Yuh got yore Ma's eyes an' yore Ma's spirit, son, an' me an' yore brother Denny wants yuh should have it yore way 'fore yuh git a killer brand, but yuh got Carnahan blood an' it'll bring yuh back to the Owlhoot no matter how far or fast yuh ride."

Yes. Ornery old Matt, long marked for the hang-noose as head of the Carnahan Wild Bunch, had said that. And he'd gripped Pat's hand with a horny grasp.

"Me an' Denny's wishin' yuh all the luck yuh might o' had if yore Ma had lived," old Matt had added. "An' we'll do our damnedest to keep any shirt-tail kin from pickin' out yore sign."

Pat thought of all that in a flash as he tried to bring out the rest of what he must say. And as he did, he pulled up his high-stepping Morgan horse, for Rita O'Riley had stopped her palomino without speaking.

That whining bullet took up the talk right there, and its heavy echoes thundered across the bench. Another exploding carbine added its savage, deadly voice to the first. The shots racketed out and the next bullets hummed viciously off the black volcanic rock under the belly and around the stockinged feet of the girl's rearing palomino.

PAT Carney whipped his lean body over, grabbing at the reins of the spooked palomino. He missed. Rita O'Riley's beast hadn't been broken to gunfire.

"Grab leather an' hang on," was all Pat had time to shout as the horse swerved and bolted down the slant of the bench.

Pat jerked his head around just far enough to see the bluish red blaze of the guns in the jumbled rocks a little above. It was too far away for his single six-shooter to be of any use.

There could have been two ambushers with carbines or maybe half a dozen for all Pat could determine from the ripping gunfire. But it was dead certain in the back of his mind that old Matt hadn't succeeded in keeping what he'd called the Carnahan shirt-tail kin off Pat's back trail.

"An' I hadn't no more savvy than to think the rest o' Matt's wild bunch would give me a free range to maybe spill what I knowed that'd set the law dogs on 'em—"

Pat grated out his theory of this attempted gulching and followed it with a string of furious oaths as he sent his horse down the bench to head off the bolting palomino before the runaway hit a badger hole or Rita O'Riley went out of the saddle.

The running horses were almost even paced. Pat stopped swearing and drew a bit freer breath when he saw that the girl still was mounted as her spooked beast left the pitch of the steep bench and turned into the smoother trail along the flats border—Mantrap Creek.

"If I'd a lick o' sense," muttered Pat, "I'd pull off the blinders I've been wearin' an' light a shuck outta the damn' country. I wouldn't so much as ride down to the Stirrup to pick up my warbag."

He saw now that Rita O'Riley had steadied the palomino and was apparently safe from a spill, although the high-strung beast still had the steel in its teeth and was drawing away from the Morgan.

He had his own horse down in the smooth creek trail now and Rita and the palomino were a vanishing shadow in the direction of the Stirrup home buildings some two miles away. All at once Pat sensed that Rita had control of her horse and was pulling up.

"It was bad enough tryin' to tell 'er, an' now it'd be just plain hell," said Pat grimly. "Maybe it's like old Matt said, I'll be hittin' back to the Owlhoot no matter what. An' Rita could be another like my own Ma who followed old Matt only to die when I was born in a hole-in-the-wall hide-out."

There wasn't any doubt now but that Rita was meaning to wait for Pat to catch up. And if he did that would put them together right nigh the home ranch where it was still early enough for the Stirrup hands to be moving around.

Rita's father, Mike O'Riley, nearly always lazed around the bunkhouse until late. And if old Mike, who was as square a shooter as Pat Carney had ever met up with, found out that Rita had been riding out as she had been, it would about finish busting up Mike's life.

"Why in all hell I had to be hired on by the whitest hombre in the state gits me," muttered Pat. "An' then along comes Rita, an' me a damn' lowdown spawn o' the Carnahans not havin' no more sense than to think that maybe—"

GUNFIRE from the bench broke out again.

Pat swore savagely at what suddenly came to him as being the possible truth. Hell! He'd been riding night guard in the top bench meadow on as slick a bunch of Morgan colts as had ever been foaled.

Rita's riding up three moonlit nights in a row had been her own idea. Not that Pat hadn't wanted her, and then had had his eyes opened too late to what was

happening and had put his mind upon the breed he really was.

As he heeled the Morgan back up the bench, both carbines and short guns were cracking. The gunfire gave the story. Pat had been told there hadn't been any beef rustling or horse stealing in the San Miguel flats country for a long time.

"Mike O'Riley's had the luck o' the devil in the few years he's been raisin' Morgans for the army posts," had been the words of Zeb White, the Stirrup ramrod, weeks before when he had hired Pat on O'Riley's recommend. "Time was in the San Miguel, 'tween Taos and Sante Fe, the old man would've been payin' gun wages. But they ain't been no thievin' or killin' down in this country since the old Carnahan Wild Bunch was chased to hell-an'-gone up north into the Colorado badlands."

That had been a moment when Pat could be sure that Zeb White, whose glance seemed to read inside a man, hadn't nowise connected the Carney with Carnahan.

What hombre would, for Pat had his dead mother's coloring and didn't otherwise resemble the straw-blond Carnahans with their blue killer-eyes.

The shooting had halted again by the time Pat eased the winded saddle horse back onto the flatter mountain bench where the fifty-odd colts grazed. At the prevailing prices being paid by the Army at the Pueblo and other northward posts there was a neat fortune in that still unbroken herd of half-wild yearlings.

Pat heeled his horse to a faster pace when he could see the two sentinel rocks that marked the gap of a canyon trail which opened from the top meadow into the broken badlands mesa of the lower Perdition Range. Except for the bench drop to the Mantrap Creek trail leading back to the Stirrup home corrals, that notch into the well named Perdition was the only outlet from the meadow.

The fifty-odd colts were missing. Pat was but a few minutes reaching the Sentinel rock gap. It had been tightly blocked with the toughest of thorn bush. It was now wide open and there was no doubt but that the Stirrup's finest colt bunch of the season had been stampeded into the Perditions, through which there were a hundred rough trails toward the border below Sante Fe.

Pat hauled up his horse in the gap, swearing over the futility of a lone pursuit.

"Put one damn' high ratin' on myself opinin' them Carnahan shirt-tail cousins would be wastin' powder gulchin' me on account o' what I knowed," said Pat, then checked himself.

"Thinkin' on it though, two or three o' the bunch could-a give old Matt the slip an' been trailin' me," he added with sudden and bitter sense of guilt. "An' they've been spottin' them colts, an' seen what's been buildin' 'tween Rita an' me. I'm dumber than a sucklin' calf. That moonlight was too bright for them rannies to have missed hittin' us at that range. They done just what they was intendin', spooked Rita's beast knowin' I was so damned taller-brained I'd go bustin' after her."

There was no other way Pat Carney could sum up the rustling raid in a few seconds of thinking. And his thinking was busted up by the clinking of steel shod hooves on the rocky bench back of the meadow, coming up fast from the Stirrup.

II

PAT'S trail-savvy told him half a dozen or more riders were coming toward the meadow.

Then for the moment Pat was overwhelmed by the extent of his own personal disaster.

Within a few minutes, if these were Stirrup riders approaching, he would be branded as a hand with less brains than a sand lizard.

And his sixshooter still cold in leather.

Then the whole plan came to Pat with smashing decision. There wasn't a doubt in his mind but he'd been trailed here by a few of the Carnahan Wild Bunch. And they could have 'bushed him permanent but they had been too smart for that.

The Morgan colts presented a means of throwing Pat to the wolves, and at the same time afforded a pickup of a big chunk of easy dinero.

That spooking trick with the carbines, and the running off of the Morgan bunch had been slick.

Pat didn't wait for the oncoming riders to reach the meadow behind him. He sent his mount ahead into the narrow gap. He hadn't the slightest notion of picking up any sign he could follow, but he chose facing the badlands rather than the angry Stirrup riders.

He was no more than a couple of hundred yards along the gap trail when his Morgan suddenly reared and shied, causing him to lose a stirrup. Two things happened so close together that it was impossible for Pat to separate them.

His horse had been spooked by the smell of death and fresh blood that came from the body of a man lying in the trail ahead of him.

A six-gun smashed out so nearby that its explosion seemed to crack Pat's eardrums. A man hurtled down upon him from the rocky ledge a few feet above, and a gun barrel crunched upon Pat's skull.

Hard, damning oaths were slapping into his ears and bringing him back to his senses.

Zeb White had a habit of talking through his teeth and the Stirrup ramrod's words were the first that came clearly.

"Yup, Reager, you sure enough got you one o' the Carnahans that ain't been seen 'round the San Miguel for more'n three years!"

With as much sense as he could make of it through the roaring that seemed to split his brain, Zeb White was identifying him, Pat Carney, for who he was.

Then there was the slower, deep voice of Mike O'Riley.

"Reckon you tagged the varmint, Zeb. I seen that Weasel Potter's ugly pan on too many reward posters to be mistooken. You done a good job drillin' him, Reager. An' you're thinkin' Pat Carney was high tailin' with him an' them other damn' hoss thieves when you jumped 'im an' cracked him down?"

"REAGER? Bunt Reager?"

Pat lay still, waiting, pondering these words. Bunt Reager was a Stirrup rider, hired on only recently He was a hook-nosed ranny with a jutting chin, and he topped six feet of loosely coupled weight over 200 pounds. He had arrogant conceit, but he was a top rider, and he sought no friends except two other newly hired hands he usually pardnered with on payday sprees up at Taos.

Pat was finding some strength returning to his arms as Reager spoke up.

"I ain't sayin' Pat Carney was in cahoots with the raiders what run off them colts," stated Reager. "I didn't make out it was Carney until after I'd jumped 'im an' laid 'im out. He hadn't no iron but his six-gun, and that ain't been fired. But I'd say he was cold-trailin' the hoss thieves, maybe hopin' to spot where they was headin', an' he was smart not to try usin' a short gun against the carbines, like the one this dead Carnahan was totin'."

Pat could have raised himself then, but he waited. He hadn't liked the looks of Bunt Reager from the minute he'd laid eyes on him. An' he had suspected Reager was of like opinion concerning himself.

Pat hadn't been paired off with Reager and he hadn't been looking forward to it. There had been another angle to Bunt Reager hiring out to the Stirrup that Pat had wished he hadn't run onto.

This last looped in the one other woman of the O'Riley family, and Pat wanted no part of it. Yet it had been difficult to ignore Mrs. Mike O'Riley, the female that O'Riley had brought home from Sante Fe a year before, at the end of a wild week that had followed a fall round-up drive of Stirrup beef.

Pitch pine knots flared up. A bottle was tipped and Pat permitted choking whiskey to seep between his lips. But he kept his eyes slitted, his body inert.

"You showed guts an' damn' good shootin' when you drilled this here Weasel Potter, pittin' a six-gun agin' that carbine."

It was the heavy voice of Mike O'Riley, his words directed at Bunt Reager. Pat made out O'Riley's broad Irish face with blue eyes set deep under shaggy brows as white as frost.

Pat was juggling in his mind what he must tell, what he must do. O'Riley was known through the San Miguel, all the way from Taos down to Sante Fe, as the most cantankerous old coot and the kindliest, depending upon the circumstance.

The rich owner of the Stirrup, the biggest combined horse and beef ranch in the state, was feared for a fighting temper that had not always stopped short of killing.

And he would sit up all night with the boys looking after a sick mare or ride out a sandstorm to rescue a neighbor from starving.

Half a dozen Stirrup riders were with Zeb White and the boss. Pat knew there was no man there had any liking for the hawk-nosed, arrogant Bunt Reager.

Pat saw Zeb White hefting a heavy army carbine.

"You could-a got yourself gutted ridin' onto such as this Carnahan owlhoot with nothin' but your short gun, Reager," stated Zeb White. "Lucky it was too dark in the gap for him to get you in his sights when he blasted at you."

Pat's brain was in a turmoil of pain, but he was beginning to recollect some now.

"The thievin' son missed an' I slammed lead into the blaze of his carbine," explained Reager. "Reckon it was luck. I'm surmisin' Pat Carney was holed up at one side, an' when he heard the last shootin' he come ridin' down onto me. Thinkin' he was another o' the Carnahan bunch I whammed into him and slapped him off his hoss with my gun 'fore he saw me comin'."

Pat's mind suddenly was clearing, bringing out graphic details. Reager appeared to be doing his best to give Pat a clean slate. But Pat wasn't recollecting what happened the way Reager had told it.

No. There hadn't been gunsmoke when he had ridden into the Perdition gap, thought Pat. Neither from a carbine nor a short gun.

His horse had been spooked first of all by the body in this narrow, black trail and the smell of fresh blood. Then a .45 had blasted right close. Pat could recall that he had instinctively ducked.

Just after the short-gun explosion his skull had been whacked so hard that he hadn't held a split second of consciousness.

Reager had to be lying and that made this all the more hell of a tight, for Pat's tortured thoughts went to Rita O'Riley. Had she been seen by her dad or these riders before she reached the Stirrup?

Pat was not forgetting the one little angle of this raid that could put his neck in a hang-noose. When the first carbine gunfire had broken out, Pat had just told Rita that he came of a wrong breed—that his name was not Carney.

Pat choked over another swallow of whiskey as he heard Reager say, "Liken I said, I hain't the stomach o' Capps an' Shill, an' I lit a shuck out o' Taos early when they started lappin' up tequilla in one o' them Mex cantinas. I reckon I was a mile away on the road when I heard the shootin' that stampeded them colts. I s'pose this feller you call Weasel was hangin' back lookin' to see that Carney didn't cold-trail 'em or push too close."

MIKE O'Riley put a horny grip upon Pat's shoulder and Pat's moment had come to face what he was sure must be the damnedest muddle any ranny had ever got into.

"You hearin' me, Pat?" O'Riley's deep voice was hard. It cut into Pat with the unmistakable coldness that proved O'Riley was too smart to be fooled. He had known that Pat was conscious and that he had been so for some time.

Pat had been dealt a mixed hand, and any one of the cards he played could be the Black Ace of death. Maybe this would be it.

"I've been hearin' quite a spell, boss," said Pat, opening his eyes. "I'd say that if Reager hadn't chanced along all o' the raidin' hoss thieves would have got clean away an' there'd been no knowin' it was the Carnahans. I was tooken by su'prise, an' they must o' had the gap opened 'fore they started that stampede shootin'. The damn' skunks was in amongst the colts, an' I'd maybe killed one o' the Morgans, havin' nothin' but my six-gun."

Zeb White's skeptical dig came through set teeth.

"An' I reckon you was meanin' to cold trail the snakes with nothin' but that short gun agin' their carbines."

Pat faced White's piercing eyes.

"I don't know what in hell I was meanin' to do," replied Pat with flat emphasis. "Maybe I'd have tried cold-trailin' 'em, an' maybe I wouldn't. I guess I did hold back too long, not wantin' to be blasted with a carbine, an' when I did hit into

the gap I was busted down 'fore I knowed how it happened."

O'Riley stopped a sudden muttering.

"Ain't no use takin' up the trail before sunup," he said heavily. "Pile some stones on that Carnahan skunk, an' we'll be ridin'. Maybe you showed yeller, Pat, an' maybe I wouldn't have gone hellin' into that gap myself. Let's go."

Pat Carney rode just behind Mike O'Riley. Zeb White held his horse a bit behind Pat and Pat could feel the foreman's eyes boring into the back of his neck.

The half dozen other riders were bunched. Bunt Reager was trailing as the group passed along Mantrap Creek and onto the wooden bridge leading into the Stirrup home yard. With the full New Mexico moonlight upon it, the scattered group of whitewashed 'dobe buildings made a picture tonight that Pat was sure he'd never get out of his mind and heart.

Lights still glowed from lamps in the big house and the bunkhouse. It hadn't been so many weeks since Pat had come riding to the Stirrup. But he'd had nothing like this before in his twenty-odd years.

When you've been on the dodge from the time you were a button, this cluster of 'dobe buildings on the San Miguel flats could represent the kind of a home you'd never dared dream about. Come to think of it, old Matt Carnahan had suggested that Pat ride down Taos and Sante Fe way and find out if the big Stirrup spread could use a young bronc stomper that could ride the devil and twist his tail.

There hadn't been so much as muttered conversation all the way from the mountain bench. This was of itself an ominous sign. The older riders of the Stirrup were a goodhumored, joshing bunch.

Mike O'Riley turned across the bridge and halted. He waited until the others rode on.

"They ain't any jigger on the Stirrup holds agin' you what's happened tonight, Pat," he said quietly. "Maybe so you have good reason for keepin' your loop on all you know. An' it may be that some o' what happened tonight ain't been told as might be. You roll in, Pat, an' keep your nose clean. I've a mind to stick you out on some brush poppin' for strays what's been missin'."

"Yeah, boss," assented Pat. "But I'd liken to take a pasear up into the Perditions an' see if there ain't some sign o' them colts to be picked up."

O'Riley contracted his frosty brows.

"Heap o' brush in the Perdition *malpais*, Pat. I ain't likin' your yarn much about them colts but it sometimes comes about that part o' the truth is worse than none at all. I seen Rita come ridin' in about the time o' that shootin' an' her palomino was all lathered up."

O'Riley turned abruptly toward the big house. Zeb White was outside the bunkhouse where boots were already plunking on the floor.

Zeb spoke in a low tone through his teeth.

"You hafta to practice lyin' a lot to make it sound nacheral," he said. "Salt this away, younker. I was in Taos yest'day myself, an' I seen this Weasel Potter what got himself salivated. Seemed he was on his high lonesome an' all fogged up on tequilla. Good night, Pat, an' keep your nose cleaned for the smell o' skunk."

Snores already came from some of the bunks. Four riders were playing cards for penny stakes and yawning. It was too marked to be missed that none of the Stirrup hands had it in mind to talk with Pat about the rustled colts.

Pat's bunk was near the open door. It was by chance he saw a slender figure cross the yard near the saddle corral. Pat swore under his breath.

The gray doe-skin cloak belonged to Rita. Pat looked over Bunt Reager's bunk. The man's boots weren't there. Swearing under his breath, Pat started to pull off his boots.

III

A PAIR of riders pounded across the creek bridge. They were singing drunkenly and there was no mistaking the voices of Capps and Shill, the pardners of Reager who had been left in Taos.

The two riders were about evenly matched in size and appearance. Both topped six feet and had wide shoulders. While they wore but one gun apiece, there were faded marks across the levis of both hombres.

It was easy enough to savvy that Capps

and Shill had long worn two guns, a practice not followed on the Stirrup.

With their stained beards and straw-blond hair, Capps and Shill reminded Pat of most of the Carnahan wild bunch. Both men had faded blue eyes that matched their hair, and thin-lipped mouths that twisted down at one corner.

Just before they had unsaddled and headed for the bunkhouse, Capps and Shill had been talking with somebody up by the corral. Pat tried to keep out of his mind having seen the hooded doeskin cloak of Rita crossing the yard, but he guessed that the drunken arrivals from Taos had met up with Reager.

There was no talking among the men still awake in the bunkhouse. Pat tried not to notice it, but none of the riders put their eyes upon him.

Pat was mulling over what Mike O'Riley had said about him, brush popping in the Perditions, and how Zeb White had mentioned seeing the late Weasel Potter in Taos the day before, apparently on a high lonesome. Of all his shirt-tail cousins, Pat regarded Weasel Potter as the lowest.

He thought of the time when he had all but busted Weasel Potter to a bloody mess, and had come close to killing him. Only the intervention of old Matt had saved Weasel. It had been over Weasel quirting Pat's horse across the nose.

Capps and Shill were loud-voiced as they clumped through the bunkhouse door. Pat had removed one boot and was fixing to jack the other one when the heel of Capps' boot ground on Pat's bared foot.

"Ho, younker," grunted Capps. "Excusin' me for not seein' yuh!"

Shill laughed raucously.

"Yuh hain't the only one wasn't seein' that yeller belly tonight, Capps!" roared Shill. "Way I heerd it, he made hisself so small that a whole passel o' his friends wasn't seein' him neither! What'd they pay off, Carney, for yuh bein' scarce whilst they was runnin' off them Morgan colts?"

The two tough hands hooked their thumbs in their belts and rocked with laughter.

Pat came to his feet awkwardly, wearing but one boot. Compared to either of the drunken riders, Pat looked small.

Brown eyes, usually smiling, added to the mildness of Pat's slightly rounded face. Capps and Shill topped his medium height and far outweighed him. There were two features just now that none of the other riders in the bunkhouse noticed.

Pat's brown eyes had turned agate. The angle of his jaw changed to remarkable squareness as Pat set his teeth tight.

"Yuh liken the way he dudes up his hair, Capps?" demanded Shill. "Must put slickum onto it, so's maybe the gals won't take notice he ain't man-size."

Pat was standing with one hand on his hip. His gun belt was lying in his bunk. He spoke so quietly that his words scarcely carried through the bunkhouse.

"Ask me again, Shill, about bein' paid off by the thieves what run off the colts?"

"Ho!" roared Shill and put out a hand, suddenly roughing Pat's hair.

Pat hit Shill, driving his left fist into Shill's belly. At the same instant, before Shill could move either hand, Pat swung the boot he had been holding by its top.

"Aw-r-gh!" grunted Shill from the belly blow as his face was pulled downward to meet the hard heel of Pat's boot coming up with the speed of a striking rattler.

Swung by the top the heavy foot of the boot had all the force of a stone coming from a sling. The heel pulped Shill's ear and raked a deep, bloody furrow along his cheek.

Capps was standing by, prepared to jump in, but what happened was too unexpected. Pat's ripping left fist jerked back and his hand pulled out Shill's six-shooter.

Shill was staggered, gulping for air, but he swung down with his heavy right arm, snapping Pat's head back into the edge of the upper bunk. The room danced into a blaze of colored lights, but Pat backhanded his boot and it thumped solidly across Shill's other ear.

The big man was tough and shot out his other fist with a blow that would have driven into Pat's stomach. Only Pat wasn't there. He'd dropped his boot with that second blow, seeing through a red haze that Capps had started a wild, looping swing.

Boots of the other riders scuffled the

floor momentarily, but if there had been one there thinking of siding Pat it suddenly had no purpose. Perhaps Capps had missed seeing Pat grab Shill's gun or he might have gone for his own iron.

Shill was on his knees, starting to climb back to his feet. Capps fist fanned empty air, bringing a surprised oath from the bigger man.

It must have seemed to Capps as if Pat had fallen forward under his whistling knuckles.

For the second time Pat was following the Carnahan rule—hit where the jigger ain't looking. His left hand crashed the hard barrel of Shill's .45 in a swinging arc not much more than a foot above the floor.

The cursing groan from Capps and his sudden toppling was the result of the hard metal cracking one knee-cap above his boot-top. Capps howled, trying to stay on one leg, and he flailed wildly. Pat ducked to one side.

The agony of the busted knee-cap was something that Capps had never before encountered. Old Matt had taught Pat that there was no more vulnerable spot on any man.

"I'll kill yuh fer that, yuh damn' sneak-fightin' yeller belly!" squawked Capps, and he went for his gun.

Pat was all the way down on his knees then and none there was fast enough to follow his diving movement or to understand what it meant until it was over. It was as if a bundle of dynamite had let go under the bulky figure of Capps.

Pat came up abruptly and Capps was lifted clear of the floor. The gun exploded and the bullet splintered the bunkhouse wall, but Capps was plunging head foremost through the open doorway when he trigered.

He landed on his face, and made no move to get up.

Coughing, with blood streaming from one ear, Shill saw Pat's belted gun lying on his bunk and bent to grab it. He stopped as suddenly as if he had been paralyzed.

Pat's eyes were agate hard, but his face was unmarked. His voice was as mild as it had ever been.

"Ask me again, Shill, about bein' paid off by the thieves what run off the colts."

The muzzle of Shill's own .45 was being pushed into the side of his neck.

"I wouldn't be askin' nothin', Shill. I seen most o' it an' you an' Capps can be gettin' your time when Capps wakes up."

Zeb White, the Stirrup ramrod, talked through his teeth as usual, but he wore a hard grin. If Pat had noticed or cared, there were more friendly grins all around the bunkhouse.

Pat emptied Shill's iron, buckled on his own.

"Thanks, Zeb," he said softly, "but that Mex tequilla done it. Don't be givin' any man his time on my account."

Pat pulled on the boot he had used on Shill's face. He had a notion he wanted some fresh air, and something else had struck him.

He was dead sure that Shill and Capps had not been drunk, on Mex hellfire or any other brand of rotgut.

Pat had seen too much tequilla drunk by the Carnahan bunch. There hadn't been the sour smell of the stuff on either of the pair who, according to Bunt Reager, had been swigging heavily in Taos.

Pat wondered why the ruckus and the shooting hadn't fetched Reager. He was convinced that the fight had been forced upon him for a definite reason, and he hadn't lost anything by escaping an intended beating.

But for what reason?

The jeering taunt that had accused him of taking a payoff from the horse thieves had been deliberately planned. And if Capps and Shill had just ridden all the way from Taos, they had learned about the raid from Reager.

"It could o' wound up by puttin' more suspicion in the minds o' the other hands than they a'ready got on their own," said Pat musingly. "Sort o' fits in with all that carbine shootin' that didn't hit nothin'."

Another thought whirled into Pat's churning brain. He'd been kind of taking it for granted that some of the Carnahan shirt-tail hangers-on had trailed him here to the Stirrup.

"I'm downright slow minded," muttered Pa. "Thinkin' on it, I ain't recollectin' that any o' the Carnahans ever toted a carbine. Old Matt always had 'em fitted with the latest in light rifles."

HIS thoughts still upon Rita O'Riley, and how she might be thinking of what he had told her, Pat was hit by the thing that the ruckus with the two tough hands had almost crowded from his mind.

But Reager had been over by the horse corral. Pat recalled the slim girl in the doe-skin cloak who had crossed the ranch yard. A notion turned him toward the corral gate and the horse-shoeing shed nearby.

Pat halted in the black shadow of a tree just in time. The two figures inside the open door of the shoeing shed were blurred together. Pat was sure Reager had his arms around the woman before he heard Reager's voice.

"I'll be moseyin' over to the bunkhouse, honey, or that old rooster Zeb White'll be wonderin' why I didn't come runnin' at the shootin'. From what I seen, that damn' Capps an' Shill ain't worth hell room in a tight. Maybe so this won't work out liken we'd planned."

The girl's voice murmured. Pat's fingernails bit into his palms. Reager undoubtedly kissed the girl. Then she was scurrying toward the big house.

It was too dark to glimpse more than the tell-tale doe-skin cloak, but that was enough for Pat.

"Reckon a gal's got a right to her own choosin'," he said grimly. "But it'll be more hell than old Mike O'Riley's a'ready tooken if Rita turns out thataway."

Because of the storm within him, Pat walked down by Mantrap Creek, pulling the cold mountain air into his lungs. The water of the creek flowed as smoothly as a silver sheet under the moonlight.

Only those who knew the why of it being named Mantrap Creek would have suspected the deadly danger of the quicksand sinkholes that spotted the stream for a mile below the Stirrup buildings.

Once the portion of the San Miguel flats that was now the big Stirrup ranch had been an empire within itself. Filled with thousands of acres of spring-fed pastures and fertile, grape-growing mountain slopes, this had been the domain of one Don Hermosa Vallejo.

Mike O'Riley had married a granddaughter of Don Hermosa, and Rita O'Riley came of that blood. The great ranch of the San Miguel had been in O'Riley's hands since back in the days when the millions of beaver in the ranges had brought the hell roaring era of the Mountain Men, of the period of Kit Carson, to the Taos and Sante Fe region.

As Pat Carney came back to the bunkhouse, he was halted by the muttering of voices. The light of a lamp streamed from the porch of the big 'dobe ranchhouse.

"I'm tellin' you, Mike, that Pat's too white to be wantin' them two gun-slingin' jaspers fired, but they're gettin' their time first thing in the morning."

That was the hard voice of Zeb White.

"Yup, we ain't no place for such on the Stirrup," agreed O'Riley. "I'm only wishin' I could-a seen the whippin' Pat Carney give 'em."

At the third voice, Pat moved closer. Bunt Reager was talking.

"I was hopin' you'd lay the whole thing to that Mex rotgut an' not hold it agin' 'em. Capps an' Shill are tophands, an' I've knowed 'em long enough to see they ain't no more trouble."

"Nope!" rapped out White. "They'll get their time."

Then Pat saw young Mrs. O'Riley come hurrying down from the big house porch. Pat had to admit that, under the lamplight, young Mrs. O'Riley was one to take any man's eye.

He knew, though, that the lamplight favored the woman. He had seen her in bright sunlight and that brought out the chore of bleaching she had done to her thick hair. Close up, there were lines at the corners of Mrs. O'Riley's eyes and mouth that contradicted the youthfulness of her figure.

"Mike, darling!" Pat heard the woman speak, and he saw Mike turn as if suddenly stung.

"Wait, Zeb," directed Mike.

The voices of the woman and Mike were lowered. It was less than a minute before Pat saw Mike spread out his hands and turn. The woman went back into the house.

Pat wished he had missed all this, but he had to stay where he was by the corner of the horse stable. He saw Bunt Reager go over toward the corral.

A few seconds later Zeb White passed close to where Pat was standing.

"If it wa'ant that Mike's needin' some'n to twist the tail o' the devil an' get to he bottom o' what's liken to happen to the Stirrup, I'd roll my tarp an' clear out!"

Zeb White's rage whistled through his teeth.

"Hirin' on gun-slingin' scum at her say-so, an' lettin' her have her own way when he hates her like pizen. Now I can't fire them polecats, an' Mike O'Riley's come to where he can't call his soul his own."

Zeb White was adding some choice profanity to his speech.

Pat was again moving toward the bunkhouse when he saw Reager slip into the horse stable. Something pulled Pat closer. He heard what sounded like metal striking metal, as if a man might be toting two guns.

It was good guessing. Reager came from the stable and halted to glance in all directions. Pat stayed put. Reager was hurrying as he crossed a narrow strip of moonlight, going toward one of the haystacks over by the creek.

Pat's keen eyes didn't trick him. Reager was lugging two army carbines close to his body.

Pat watched the weapons pushed into a haystack, then he turned back to the bunkhouse. He was under the blankets and snoring when Reager entered a few minutes later.

"Yeah, boss, I'm roustin' out early on that brush poppin' chore in the Perditions," whispered Pat. "'Less there was others waitin' in the badlands, them colts ain't more'n a hoot an' a holler beyond Sentinel Rocks."

Pat wouldn't have slept so quickly and soundly if he had seen a rider leave the ranch yard quietly an hour later. Rita O'Riley turned up a trail that cut toward the Perditions.

It was two hours before sunup when Pat dressed quietly. He took a spare six-gun from his warbag, then went over and hooked onto a .30-30 repeater belonging to Zeb.

A single lamp glowed faintly in the main house as Pat led his saddled Morgan from the stable. He had marked well the spot in the haystack visited by Reager a few hours before.

The two carbines Reager had hidden in the haystack had been removed. The hay was scattered where the weapons had been pulled out.

"I might-a knowed they'd tail out fast," said Pat grimly. "It's an even bet though that Capps ain't havin' easy ridin' with that busted knee-cap."

IV

PAT CARNEY was well inside the gap leading to the many badland trails by sunup. He had the sixes loosened in their leathers. The .30-30 in the saddle boot had a full magazine.

Pat shivered with more than the morning chill as he passed the mound of rocks that protected the body of Weasel Potter from vultures. The dawn's gray light came as Pat arrived at the first fork of the gap trail.

Looking at the wide mesa, spotted with mesquite and ghostly saguaro cactus trees, and the multitude of canyons that broke off on all sides, Pat realized that a few raiders could keep out of the way of an army of hundreds in this thick malpais jumble.

"Like as not there's good grass in a lotta pocket meadows here an' there," reasoned Pat aloud. "An' 'less I'm throwin' the long loop them colts couldn't-a been hazed far. Could be the damn' thieves had pardners waitin', but I'm thinkin' the stealin' o' the colts ain't nothin' but a throw-off for some bigger play."

Pat didn't know how close he was to guessing the truth.

He cussed over his scanty knowledge of this Perditions country. He was soon to find out there was another rider ahead who had known these badlands for many years.

At the head of a draw Pat found a narrow, crooked trail. He pulled into the shelter of a rocky shoulder.

There was fresh horse sign on the trail. That cocked Pat's eyes upon all the possible places where gulchers might hole up when they heard him coming.

"I'm damn' dumb for ridin' out alone," he muttered. "But they ain't any other way to rub the dirt off my name."

Pat eased his Morgan slowly down the trail. He let the horse drink where a creek cut across. A little sand showed hoof-

prints. They had been made within the hour.

As he rode on, Pat's stomach muscles twitched. There had come the sudden neighing of a horse, and it was taken up by others.

"Them colts is holed up down there sure as sin," muttered Pat. "If I'd a lick o' sense, I'd ease back an' hit for the Stirrup."

"Lift 'em high, an' don't make a wrong move!"

The voice caught Pat with the impact of a blow. At the sound of it he could have shouted with surprised relief.

There was but one voice like that in the world, so far as Pat was concerned. It was the throaty contralto of Rita.

Pat tried to muster a grin as he lifted his hands and turned his head slowly. But he guessed his effort must have looked sort of sickly the way he felt inside.

He unwrapped his dry tongue.

"Lordy! I wisht I'd knowed it was you when I seen hoss sign. I was figurin' I'd get myself plugged any minute, and—"

"Loop your tongue, Pat!" The girl's voice was bitter, with the kind of forced hardness that would have started Pat singing inside if he hadn't lacked the experience to read a woman. "Where's the others that sided you an' spooked my hoss so's they could run off the colts while you was makin' out like you was tryin' to catch up an' pick me off the palomino?"

Pat swallowed hard. He first made a long guess that Rita was running a ranny on him. Then his mind whipped back to the night before and his own anger started to rise.

"I'm seein' where I was a damn', chuckle-headed fool to be thinkin' about you the way I did," said Pat harshly. "I was goin' so far as to be believin' you was the one gal in the whole world, an' on that account I was tryin' to tell you why I'd be ridin' yonderly. An' all the time you ain't no better than——"

Pat had to stop there to keep from choking. Rita O'Riley was one who could squeeze a man's heart until his blood chilled.

She had ridden from behind a rocky shoulder. She wasn't more than five feet two or three, but that didn't keep her from looking like a queen. This morning she was wearing old brush-scarred leather chaps and a faded denim brush jacket.

She held a .30-30 rifle across her body, aimed steadily at Pat's middle. Her red mouth was tight-lipped.

She was quivering with anger now in every inch of her trim body.

"I ain't no better than what, or who?"

Rita's voice dripped with poison sweetness.

"Go on and finish it, you hoss stealin' whelp!"

Pat didn't put his hands down. He just turned them helplessly.

"You can forget what I was even thinkin' on," he said. "I don't think I'll give a damn if you shoot an' go back to Bunt Reager so's he'll know you an' him is in the clear. I'd—"

Pat didn't know women. But the look that came into Rita's eyes was something that couldn't be mistaken. Where there had been no less than killing anger and purpose, there was now the expression to be found on the face of a trusting little girl who had suddenly been slapped by somebody she loved.

How it came about Pat couldn't have told, but before Rita had time to utter another word he had wheeled his horse forward. He didn't so much as notice the muzzle of the rifle touch and slide along his ribs.

Then Pat had his free arm drawing the girl to him and there was more told in that first kiss between them than in all the following half-hour of talking.

"So your name's not Carney," said Rita. "You're the whelp of an owlhoot, on your own say-so. And I haven't so much as asked you what your name might be, and I don't want to know. I wasn't out of the house early last night and I cried myself to sleep when I heard the colts were stolen. I was afraid you'd be blamed."

They had been talking several minutes.

"But you meant to shoot," suggested Pat.

"Because when I saw it was you coming riding straight for this pocket meadow, I was crazy mad at myself for loving you like I did, an' believing no outside hombre could ever stumble onto this canyon by chance. There's a hundred such in these badlands, but I've been ridin'

'em since I was knee-high. That's why I rode out in the night and was where I could pick up the first sign of the colts as soon as the sun come up."

As for Bunt Reager.

"It was cold when I rode away," she told Pat. "When I looked for my doeskin cloak I couldn't find it, so I came without it rather than wake up the house. And Pat, there's another thing. You'll have to ride back with the word where to find the colts. I'm thinking the thieves won't make a move to drive them out before tonight."

"But you, Rita?" Pat was scowling.

"As it is now, honey," and Rita smiled, "I'll hold up in Taos with Mrs. Porter until Stirrup sets a trap and roots out the thieves. You see, Pat, knowing Dad would throw a fit, I left a note saying I was leaving early to have Mrs. Porter fit me for a new dress."

THEY were coming out of the narrow gap into the meadow above San Miguel flats. Pat had kept his eyes keened for possible riders, but not one had showed.

"Dad and Zeb White will know what to do, Pat," advised Rita. "Until I can have a chance to talk to Dad, it'll be best for him to think I have been in Taos. You say he was meanin' for you to do some brush poppin' in the Perditions, so let it stay that way."

She clung to him with a long kiss before riding off.

Pat judged it would be smart to laze away some of the day and keep an eye upon that Perditions trail.

There was nary sign of anyone having trailed or spotted him with Rita this morning. Pat rode up along the rimrock cliff. He could judge fairly close where the first gunsmoke had spooked Rita's horse last night.

The empty carbine shells were not hard to find among the lava rocks. Half a dozen or more shells had been shucked out in three spots not far apart.

"That'd make it three o' the buzzards," said Pat grimly. "It could be that Weasel Potter of old Matt's bunch was one o' them, but if he was hog drunk in Taos yest'day like Zeb White said, it ain't liken he was in on that shootin'."

Pat stuck a few shells into his pocket. Then he crossed the lush meadow and grazed his horse while he fiddled away the time near a cool spring. He shot twice at a jackrabbit with the .30-30 and missed both times.

Pat dozed some, but he wouldn't have rested if he had known then what big trouble was building for him down on the Taos road and back at the Stirrup ranch. He figured on riding back in the last hours of the afternoon.

It was in the air that something was wrong at the Stirrup. Too many riders were bunched around the bunkhouse and the corral.

"Must be thinkin' o' cleanin' out all the Perdition badlands to find them colts," said Pat, grinning to himself. "Won't Mike an' Zeb be su'prised when I tell 'em where to find the Morgans."

Suddenly Pat was looking from one to another of more than a score of faces, and all were grim. He saw O'Riley come from the bunkhouse door.

Zeb White was over by the corral. The arrival of Pat seemed to be unnoticed for the moment, but then there were a dozen or more other hombres mounted and riding aimlessly about.

All at once a hard voice shouted.

"There he is, bigawd! He's got the guts to come back liken nothin' had happened!"

All eyes whipped toward Pat and he pulled up. He saw that it was Bunt Reager who had yelled. With him were Shill and Capps. Shill's face was bandaged where Pat's boot had ripped his ear and cheek.

"Hellamighty!" White grated. "He took my .30-30. It's in his saddle boot!"

He strode toward Pat's horse, reached up and seized the rifle. O'Riley kept on coming from the bunkhouse. Pat could hear others cursing, but his eyes were fixed upon O'Riley and the odd slowness of his stride.

Damned if O'Riley wasn't walking as if he was taking his last slow steps to a hanging gallows. And O'Riley's broad face was like a stone mask.

"Ain't no use askin' you where you was 'round about ten o'clock this mornin'?" O'Riley's heavy voice was a convicting statement rather than a question.

"There'd be nothin' for you to do but lie, an' like as not you'd say you was trailin' them colts at about that time."

"An' why in hell wouldn't I be sayin' what was so?" flared Pat. "I was back in the Perditions when the sun was high to noon, an' I run onto where the colts had been bush-fenced into a pocket meadow. What's this all about me lyin', boss?"

O'Riley's big hands clenched. Pat thought he was about to be hauled from the saddle.

"Tol' you he'd have a yarn all patched up," Reager sneered. "If he hadn't dropped that bill when he stuck old Sonora Jim's dinero into his war sack he'd maybe prove himself clear o' the murder, him knowin' all the time where them colts had been hazed."

Pat turned to Reager. At the same instant a rider crowded up from behind him and he felt his six-guns being pulled from their holsters.

"Taken it easy like, Pat Carney, an' I'll git yuh to the Taos jail."

Pat turned and he was looking into the narrowed eyes of Sheriff Larkin, who had been rodding the law in Taos and the San Miguel country for a dozen years. The lawman's broad mouth was grim.

The voice of Reager broke out again.

"Ain't much sense in clutterin' up your jail, Sheriff, and since I come to the Stirrup I hear you ain't never had a lynchin', but where I come from they don't waste taxpayers' dinero on back-shootin' gulchers."

Sheriff Larkin was a big man with a heavy white mustache. He had visited O'Riley several times since Pat had been on the Stirrup, and Pat had found him goodhumored for the job he held.

"Maybe I'm loco," said Pat. "But I'm hearin' a heap o' talk that don't make sense."

O'Riley spoke as if he wished he didn't have to say it.

"Murder never makes sense to a thievin' gulcher, Pat. You say you was trailin' the stolen colts at ten o'clock. That ain't any proof you was. No more than there was reason for you to tear your shirt without waitin' for mornin' grub."

Pat clamped his teeth shut. He didn't know yet what this was all about. He'd known Sonora Jim as one of the oldest of the Stirrup riders. It had been said Sonora Jim had been caching every dollar of his pay for years. And Sonora Jim didn't trust in banks that could be robbed. He kept his dinero in many hiding places.

But right now Pat wasn't asking questions.

He heard Zeb White's voice.

"Yup, the damn' skunk hadn't the sense to clean it after he done the shootin'. There's two shells been fired an' there was two holes in Sonora Jim's back." Zeb was examining the rifle.

V

"YOU'LL be stayin' to supper, sheriff," said O'Riley. "The moon'll be up, an' I reckon Pat Carney won't be makin' you no trouble ridin' to Taos."

Sheriff Larkin nodded. Steel jingled and he extended the handcuffs to Pat.

"I'll be leavin' 'em in front so's yuh can have some vittles, an' I'm sayin' plain out I'm downright disapp'inted in yuh, Pat."

Pat had his hands manacled for the first time. Zeb White was cussing as if the whole thing made him sick. Once or twice his boring eyes swung to Pat, but he looked away.

"A'right, you jiggers ridin' night guard, an' you boys on that calf brandin', you've had your grub, so fork your jugheads an' get goin'!" rasped Zeb. "Reager, you take Capps an' Shill an' see that those young beef in the upper flats is bedded down!"

More than a score of hands from the daylight side crowded into the cook shack table for supper. Pat had been hungry all day, but he'd lost his appetite now.

"They's a heap o' this I ain't knowin', Sheriff," said Pat. "I take it old Sonora Jim was back-shot this morning. I tore my shirt outta here so's I'd be in the Perditions at sunup. I run onto O'Riley's lost colts by hittin' lucky sign, an' they can be gathered if the thieves ain't a'ready moved 'em."

"Fearin' they ain't nothin' to tell yuh don't know, Pat," said Sheriff Larkin, twitching his white mustache. "All I'm

askin' is that yuh be peaceable an' I'll see yuh git every chance that's rightful."

"I didn't kill Sonora Jim," stated Pat flatly. "An' if they was some o' his foldin' money in my warbag, it wasn't there when I took my spare sixshooter out o' it 'fore sunrise an' lit a shuck for Perdition."

Sheriff Larkin was a smart lawman. He didn't always put his faith in circumstantial evidence. But now he shook his head sadly.

"It looks plumb bad, Pat. I'll loosen your hands for yuh to git some grub, but I ain't never lost a prisoner—alive."

Pat set his teeth. As they were filing into the eating shack, a shrill, tipsy voice called out from the big house porch.

"Mike—Mike, darlin'—you comin' in to supper or you preferrin' to eat with that damn' Carnahan coyote?"

Pat chilled, but glanced up to see Mrs. O'Riley lurching unsteadily across the porch, wearing a sleazy purple robe that flared open far too much.

"I'll be along in two shakes, Lily!" replied O'Riley. "Go back in the house!"

"Like hell I will!" She fairly screamed the words. "You knowed damn' well what'd happen when you hired on that whelp o' old Matt Carnahan! Him calling himself Carney!"

Zeb White was just behind Pat and the sheriff.

"If she was mine, I'd bury that damn' hussy in Mantrap Creek."

Maybe Zeb White wasn't meaning to be heard, but Pat was too far down under to be listening after the guzzling Mrs. O'Riley had named him for who he was.

Sheriff Larkin's hard fingers gripped Pat's arm.

"Set on your thinkin', Pat," he said in a hard voice. "Some o' us has been knowin' all the time yuh come from that wild bunch breed. Maybe we had hopes yuh was too much like your ma to have the Owlhoot in your blood, but I reckon we was wrong."

Pat's string was about played out as he saw it. He hadn't killed Sonora Jim. But Rita O'Riley had to be kept out of this.

She was his only alibi, seeing they said Sonora Jim had been back shot in broad daylight, ten o'clock this morning, and robbed of years of savings.

Pat pieced out most of it as the talk went around at supper.

The way it went was that Sonora Jim had arisen with the others at daylight. A few minutes later Sonora was yelling that one of his money caches had been robbed.

Pat got it that either Capps or Shill had found a bill of folding money near Pat's bunk. Zeb White had been called and Pat's warbag had been opened. The dinero Sonora had lost was found stuffed in with some dirty shirts among Pat's dunnage. Then Sonora had started for Taos to put all of his money in the bank.

Pat pieced out the whole story, but not even the prospect of being swung for Sonora Jim's murder was uppermost in his mind. He was thinking desperately how he could communicate with Rita and prevent her putting shame on herself by telling the truth.

The full moon was high when Sheriff Larkin linked Pat's wrists behind him on a spare horse and started for Taos.

"Never thought as how I'd be havin' to string up one o' the Carnahan Wild Bunch," said the lawman as they hit the road for Taos.

Sheriff Larkin was the kind of a grim old law dog who could read and respect another man's mood. He rode silently, speaking but once.

"If them cuffs is irkin' yuh, Pat, say the word an' I'll loosen 'em a bit."

"I ain't feelin' 'em," said Pat.

If Sheriff Larkin had any thought that Pat had really been in cahoots with some of the Carnahan Wild Bunch in the raid upon the Stirrup Morgans the night before, he appeared to have no fear of a possible attempt at rescue for his prisoner. The horses held at a fast space covering walk. About a mile from the Stirrup the Taos road curved under the slope of the Perditions mountain bench, and mesquite was mixed with spots of cactus, throwing the trail into a deep shadow.

It happened where the road twisted around a jutting heap of rocks and mesquite. The shoulder above was in black shadow at the moment Pat and the Sheriff were suddenly outlined in the moonlight.

A loop hissed downward stinging Pat's ear. He cried out an instinctive warning to Sheriff Larkin, but he was too late.

As the lariat tightened, yanking him from the saddle, a rider jumped his horse from around the twisting trail ahead, crashing between the beasts of the lawman and Pat.

Pat was helpless to protect himself as he landed on the hard surface of the lava rock road, his wrists being held behind his back. He was quick enough though to draw his head down tight and try to save his skull from being cracked.

As the lawman fell, Pat saw the attacker snatch the Sheriff's Peacemaker. The Sheriff's horse reared, then bolted away. The Sheriff's own six-shooter flamed and the heavy .45 bullet smashed into the lawman's back between the shoulders at a distance of but a few feet.

The killer slid from his saddle uttering a profane laugh.

It was Shill. A bandage still covered his torn ear. He made no effort to conceal his identity as his gloating speech slapped Pat's ears.

"I'd sure as hell liken to give yuh the same dose or maybe gutshoot yuh an' see yuh die slow, Pat Carnahan! But I ain't roddin' this game an' it'll be so yuh'll wish yuh had died with the lawdog!"

PAT was fully conscious, but he forced all tenseness to flow from his muscles, lying there as lifeless as an empty hide. He had landed on his right shoulder and he now lay on his side, keeping his head down with his chin on his breastbone as though his neck might have been broken.

The handcuffs had bitten into the flesh of his wrists. Shill stepped toward him.

"Slick an' fast! An' it'll put one more killin' onto that damn' son o' the Owlhoot! Ain't yuh puttin' another slug in that law dog fer luck, Shill?"

It was the harsh voice of Capps, and he came down the rocky slope hauling in on the lariat enough to keep it tightened.

"Come to think on it, Capps, that'll put this Carnahan in a worse tight an' maybe git him dragged behind a bronc 'stead o' bein' jest strung up quick like!"

Shill laughed and threw another shot at the dead sheriff.

"Catch up Carnahan's hoss an' tie the beast handy fer him when he wakes up, Capps!" Shill's sudden order to Capps didn't make sense to Pat.

Capps approached and drove a boot toe into Pat's ribs. Pat took the tearing agony without flinching.

"If it wasn't how the boss says it has to be, I'd rip off one o' the damn' buzzard's kneecaps with a bullet for what he done to me!" raged Capps, booting Pat again in the ribs. "Git the keys off that lawdog, Shill, an' we'll loosen them cuffs 'fore he knows what's happened."

Capps freed the lariat loop, and with the brass honda slapped Pat across the nose as the rope was jerked free. Pat almost choked, repressing a groan and tasting the salty blood running over his lip.

Shill scuffed across the road and the sheriff's killer stood over him with the handcuff keys.

"If the boss wasn't so damn' scared o' something slippin', me an' you could take the gal up to one o' them hill shacks, Capps, an' git us a jug of tequilla—"

Shill's words and meaning hit Pat like the slapping of a red-hot branding iron onto his stomach before Capps cut in on Shill.

"Yuh damn' fool!" grated Capps. "Don't git ideas when you know Reager's spottin' every move an' knows we've got the gal. We hafta be back in the Stirrup bunkhouse when that *Thunder* stallion busts through the Mantrap fence an' old Mike O'Riley takes his last ride into that hell's sink. I'm thinkin' Reager's aimin' to be sure the gal goes with 'im. He's got Zeb White by this time an' he's waitin' fer us to show up with Rita O'Riley."

"A'right, a'right," grunted Shill. "I'm unlockin' them cuffs, an' then we'll fetch the gal down an' high-tail. Maybe so somebody might a heered this last shootin'."

Pat's heart was suddenly a ball of hellfire that sent liquid flame through his veins.

"Git the cuffs off 'im, Shill, an' stick the Sheriff's gun in his belt!" cracked out Capps. "The gal's hog-tied an' gagged with that sack holdin' her on her hoss! We gotta ride up the bench an' high-tail with her fer the Stirrup 'fore this wildcat owlhoot wakes up!"

One more stiff boot in the ribs had no more effect upon Pat Carney than if he'd been the dead sheriff. He couldn't see where he had a Chinaman's chance, but the thought of Rita having been in the hands of these coldblooded killers left him no mind to figure how she might come out.

Shill's big hands rolled him half over and the key clicked in the handcuffs. Shill jerked the cuffs apart and then, because of the sheer brutality in him, he twisted one hand in Pat's hair.

Shill had made that same mistake once before. He evidently felt safe enough now, with Pat knocked out and his hands still at his back.

Pat's right leg doubled, then straightened. A mule couldn't have kicked harder. His boot heel drove into Shill's groin.

Pat's right hand whipped up as Shill started to fall. Capps cursed, but his hands were not as quick as his foul tongue.

With Shill lying across him and trying to batter at his face with fists that had no power, Pat had Sheriff Larkin's Peacemaker from Shill's belt.

"If there was time, I'd make it slow," rasped Pat. "But—"

Capps had his .45 half dragged from leather when Pat shot him in the throat. Shot him with the gun of the dead Taos lawman.

There was a cold, vengeful fury in Pat that he had never before known. But never before, not even with the Carnahan Wild Bunch, had he seen a dead man shot in the back.

Pat kicked Shill in the stomach, then sent a bullet ranging upward through the belly.

"Rita?" Pat repeated her name, but that was all.

Capps had said she was tied and gagged on her horse somewhere on the mountain bench. But he had added that Bunt Reager had got Zeb White. And Mike O'Riley had been tagged to ride into the bottomless death of Mantrap Creek.

"If Capps an' Shill was expected to fetch Rita, an' Reager is waitin', there's no time to scout the bench," said Pat grimly.

His quick hands belted the guns of both Capps and Shill. He went for Shill's horse, still having the mind to know that he might be needing the coiled lasso rope on the saddle.

VI

PAT RODE THE MILE BACK TO the Stirrup with the recklessness of a madman who couldn't catch up with his own maddened brain. As he came near the bridge of Mantrap Creek, Pat saw the flames.

"So that'd be the play," gritted Pat. "That'll pull every Stirrup hand away from the Mantrap death sink."

A haystack set too close to an old horse stable was blazing fiercely. Pat could see a line of half dressed hands passing buckets from the creek to try and save the stable.

Pat turned and sent his horse hell-hootin' down the creek. The wooden bridge was some half a mile below the burning haystack. The shouting and cursing of the Stirrup riders running a bucket line to the already smoking old stable had been cleverly calculated to make a noise that would drown out what might be happening lower down on Mantrap Creek.

Pat's sharp eyes searched the vicinity of the bridge as his horse thundered onto it. He judged Bunt Reager might be waiting here for the appearance of his snaky killer pards, with Rita O'Riley as their prisoner.

Pat had one .45 tightly gripped in his hands. He was all the way across the bridge and Bunt Reager hadn't showed. All in a flashing sweep of his eyes Pat saw and understood why the boss of the dead killers hadn't been at the bridge.

"Damn the pizen-hearted mongrel! He was too crowded to hold up for Capps an' Shill!"

Wild oaths were ripping off Pat's tongue. For he saw Mike O'Riley's stallion, Thunder, the pride of the Stirrup spread, less than a hundred yards away in the bright moonlight. The best Morgan in all of the Southwest, put above any money value by Mike O'Riley, was breaking through a gap where spikes of the fence along the deathhole sink had been busted down.

The stallion had been spooked by six-gun shots that were still blazing from a corner of the horseshoeing shed. Pat saw the tall, bulky figure of Reager. The boss of the killers had a .45 in each hand and

bullets were geysering sand under the heels of the stallion.

At the instant the horse was through the guard fence and plunging on down the sand toward the bottomless sink, Reager quit shooting. Pat's innards went icy.

Mike O'Riley himself, mounted on another horse, was making a dash for the fence.

The old rancher was building a loop with a skill and speed that none of his own punchers could have equalled.

Pat was yelling, but he didn't know it.

"No, boss! No! You ain't got the room!"

But O'Riley sent his horse through the fence gap, gaining fast on the stallion as the latter hit the yielding sand. His loop shot out and whipped down over the stallion's arching neck as the beast reared, sliding in the sucking sand.

O'Riley dallied the rope, and his own trained horse tried to set itself stiff-legged. The lariat snapped tight and Pat unconsciously uttered a cheer. But abruptly he changed to curses.

O'Riley's roping horse had gone too far into the sand to find solid footing. The stallion, Thunder, screamed and his plunging weight pulled the other beast along, with Mike O'Riley hauling on useless reins.

"Roll, boss! Jump!" Pat yelled.

Pain like a hot iron ran along his ribs. His head jerked around in time to see Reager triggering both of his guns from the shed. Another hunk of lead ripped through the broad rim of Pat's stetson.

Pat had already jammed his own six-shooter back into its leather and had been gathering his rope to build a loop. He couldn't drop the loosened string without entangling it, and his own running Morgan had its weight on his left hand.

"Yuh damn' son—!"

Pat swerved his horse, unable to make a reach for either of his guns. He hadn't time to do other than he did, although lead whined off his saddle, and Reager's flaming guns sent their bullets whistling past his ears.

Pat's horse jerked, staggered slightly, but lunged ahead then with its speed apparently increased by a bullet sting. Reager had been too sure of his guns, and he was a split second too late trying to dodge Pat's maddened Morgan.

PAT had been born clean of all viciousness that could make him feel the satisfaction of killing. But now, as he heard Reager scream and almost felt the crunch of the steel-shod hooves over the man's body, Pat swore wildly and with an exultation that came only from his anger over the fiendish killing he had already seen and the coldblooded attempt to bury Mike O'Riley alive.

He was dizzy, and he could feel warm blood on his side, but he was able to swing his horse back toward the fence gap. In riding Reager down Pat had lost sight of O'Riley.

What Pat saw now sent a shudder through him. O'Riley was still in his saddle. Thunder was already belly down in the death sand, and the roping horse had sunk to its knees at the edge of the bog.

O'Riley was clinging desperately to his horse's mane, swaying like a drunken man. Pat had never built a faster loop than now. He sent his horse toward the fence gap, and he didn't know he was praying through clenched teeth as his beast stumbled twice, but kept going.

Thunder screamed and was all but neck down. There would be no saving that one. O'Riley's beast was floundering, sliding, fighting for a foothold.

Pat couldn't puzzle out why O'Riley stayed with his horse. Then in the split flash of a second Pat heard the crack of a rifle.

Even as he whirled his loop, fighting off his own weakness, and hoping for one chance in a hundred that his throw would be sure, Pat snapped his head to one side. He saw then why O'Riley hadn't let his saddle, might never leave it until the time came for his skeleton to break up somewhere in that bottomless sink of death.

Mrs. Lily O'Riley, well fogged with whiskey, was what had saved Mike O'Riley's life thus far. She was standing on the house porch, her slender figure swaying from side to side.

White fire spat from the repeating rifle in her hands.

O'Riley jerked and partly straightened, and Pat knew he had been hit again. How he made a straight, clean throw, with a narrowing loop from the horse he was pulling around at the same time, was a mystery to Pat.

He heard another slug buzz viciously from the sand under his own horse. Then his Morgan was turning, pawing at solid ground.

Pat felt the rope he had dallied cut across one leg and bite into his flesh. His horse had completed the pivot and he jammed in the steel as he faced back into the broken fence and made sure that Mike O'Riley had been hauled from his saddle and was being dragged up along the sand. He was half blinded, but he saw Mrs. O'Riley on the porch.

A short gun cracked out twice and the rifle fell from her hands.

The trim figure of Rita O'Riley was in the saddle of the Morgan horse that swung back toward Pat.

Rita held a smoking .38 in her hand, and then she was running toward Pat.

THE earth went out from under Pat. The Stirrup ranch buildings appeared to vanish in gunsmoked moonlight. He guessed it was all right for a son of the Owlhoot to die if such dreams were to be in the hereafter.

For Rita O'Riley was kissing him. Her warm rounded arms were holding his head. It was fine to be dead.

Only why in the devil did the spirit of that ornery rooster, Zeb White, have to be here, and talking as usual.

"Mike ain't got nothin' but a busted shoulder an' a clean hole through his arm," Zeb was saying. "Dammit, it's too bad Pat's hoss didn't put a foot through Reager's guts, 'stead o' only bustin' a leg an' half a dozen ribs.

"Buck Simms!" cracked out Zeb White. "You ride to Taos an' bring Doc Doner hellin' out here. You git patched up Mike, an' maybe you'll quit squawkin' about losin' Thunder and that other hoss.

"An' Buck, you fetch along a pair o' poor old Larkin's deputies. I'm thinkin' Lily O'Riley, who's been Missus Bunt Reager all the time, an' Reager, had best be in the hoosegow 'fore folks up thataway find out they was behind the killin' o' Sheriff Larkin."

"Rita—soon as I rest up a bit, I'll be packin' my war-bag an' gettin' the hell out—"

Pat hadn't ever been slapped, even by old Matt. But he got it then, flathanded.

"You be tryin' to run out on me after bein' up in the Perditions most o' the night with me, Pat Carney—I mean Carnahan," said Rita. "I've been taught that even an owlhoot whelp has to make out he's got a sense o' honor."

Zeb chuckled. "I s'pose Mike, you'll be runnin' the owlhoot son o' Matt Carnahan off the Stirrup 'cause your gal told you she'd rather ride the owlhoot with Pat than heir the whole damn' Stirrup, an' you come 'most puttin' the San Miguel in the hands o' that Sante Fe—"

"Don't be sayin' it, Zeb, or I'll be hirin' me a new ramrod pronto," cracked O'Riley. "You make one more dig at me marryin' up with her that turned out to be makin' me a bigamist, an' you'll be the first jigger fired when Pat Carnahan takes over the Stirrup."

Pat shook the fog from his eyes. Any direction he looked he met up with grinning faces.

"Rita, you turned out a damn' poor shot," put in Zeb. "All you do is bust that Sante Fe hellion's arm an' a leg."

Rita's voice was low and cold as she replied.

"I always hit what I'm aimin' for, Zeb. Dad's been so all-fired set on me marryin' up with some rich dude from back east, I want him to keep right on recollectin' he's a bigamist, so's there won't be any lingerin' idea in his mind that I ain't hitching up with Pat Carney— or—"

Mike O'Riley grinned against the pain of his busted shoulder.

"Or Carnahan, Rita," he supplied for her. "Now there's a son of an Owlhoot who figures he ain't the breed to rate a gal like you Rita. Damned if he wouldn't have let 'em hang 'im an' kept his tongue buttoned up.

"Just so there won't be any notion o' yours that you'll be naggin' Pat some day about his Owlhoot blood, here's somethin' to chaw on.

"'Fore I hit the San Miguel an' met your Ma, me an' that sanctified old rooster, Zeb White, rode the Owlhoot with Matt Carnahan. So you can kiss Pat now, Rita, an' always recollect when the goin' gets tough, you come of the same owlhoot breed as Pat himself."

Candidate For Boothill

By Art Kercheval

An old coot can reap a heap of fun and greenbacks when he's as card-lucky as Pat-Hand Geary—or he can snare a jackpot boastin' the Swinging-Q spread . . . and that's nothin' more than an idiot's interest in plain hellfire and brimstone.

Poker Face, humping high, and swapping ends, tossed his rider.

THE CRIMSON orb of the sun was at noontime peak when Pat-Hand Geary rode up to the Swinging Q. He pulled up his jug-headed dun stallion, cuffed back his hat to scratch his hoary head, and reflected with some misgivings that he was half master of all he surveyed. He appreciated the fact that his newly acquired partner, Kiley Tait, had a number of high-spirited horses penned in the big holding-corral. They were built for speed and endurance.

Pat-Hand, poker-playing range roamer, merely relaxed in the saddle, building a brown-paper quirly, as the big man slammed out of the ranchhouse and came strid-

ing toward him. That this was Kiley Tait, he had no doubt. Like he would size up an opposing player in a game of stud, Pat-Hand eyed the other. The abrupt way, that was how to handle a gent like Tait. So Tait would get the drift of things in a hurry, Pat-Hand, without preamble, would put his cards face-up. A smile worked gradually into Pat-Hand's face as he licked his cigarette-paper.

"Howdy, Kiley Tait," he said yawningly, and without humor. "You didn't know it up till now, but you're gonna see a lot of me, yet. Name o' Pat-Hand Geary. Beginnin' night before last, I become part owner of the Swingin' Q. From now on, it's a fifty-fifty proposition round here!"

Tait jerked back as if he'd been hit with a rock. His close-set little eyes held a curious stare in a wide, ugly face. There was a trickle of tobacco, at the corner of his mouth. For an instant, his hand edged toward his leathered Colt; then it froze. Something about Pat-Hand discouraged him.

Pat-Hand's slight grin held a devilish twist. But his eyes narrowed, chilling a little.

He sensed something was wrong. Maybe he was a damned fool, coming to the Swinging Q. Pat-Hand couldn't decide just what, but there was something queer about this fellow, no doubt of that. From the way Tait stared in awe now, at Poker Face, his expression downright covetous, Pat-Hand gathered horses were an obsession with him. Pat-Hand let smoke ravel from his nose, and spoke again:

"Won half of this horse outfit in a poker game," he informed Tait slowly. "Happened over Cholla City way, Tuesday night. Me, I'm kind of a rovin' gambler and grubliner, workin' cows only occasional. Rather sit in on a stud session than eat. Well, we're playin' it red-hot, there in the Catawampus Saloon, with this Cico Saunders feller sittin' in—"

"Cico Saunders!" gasped Tait, stiffening with surprise. "What—what—"

"Comin' to that," Pat-Hand grunted, pinching the spark out of his quirly stub and tossing it away. "Lady Luck, 'pears like, was sure a-sidin' me that night. Sure's shootin'! Saunders was growin' desperate. He made out a bill of sale to his half of the Swingin' Q, which he bragged was the best cayuse spread north of Acey Ducey Creek. I saw the paper was okay, all right. Had ol' Judge Sawtelle of Cholla City look into it. Saunders' chunk of Swingin' Q went into the pot. 'Twas one deal—a showdown hand. 'I drew three queens. All he could sprout was kings and sixes. That's why I'm here, Mister. Like it or swaller your quid, I'm half boss now, and rake in half the profits!"

TAIT stepped toward Pat-Hand's horse, his big fists tightening. "Why, you damned smooth-talkin' old billy goat!" he barked. "Cico Saunders had no right to part with any of this land and stock—not without my say-so!"

"Oh yes he did," Pat-Hand panted out. "Saunders showed me a copy of the original contract which gives either pardner the right to sell, trade or give away his half of the spread, without the knowledge or consent of the other pardner. The judge hombre said it's all on the up-and-up. I'm now a horse rancher. Simmer down to a boil, Tait. You and me might's well try to get along. Way it looks, we're gonna be seeing each other for a mighty long time."

"That's what you think—"

"Hold it!" Pat-Hand murmured gently. He wasn't grinning at all now. "No threats. And keep your paw offa that persuader. Might mention I'm some rapid with a smokepole my ownself. Clear now, I reckon, why Saunders lit a shuck. Maybe-so, before long, I'll be honin' to quit the coop, too. But I'd best remind you I've lived nigh sixty years, Tait, without any nicks clusterin' up my hide. In that time, a flock of gents have tried to get at my backbone. And they're all dead!"

He sighed. "I'm tired, dusty and hungry. All I can think of now is some heavy grub to take the slack outa my belt. You willin' to play the cards the way they lay? Or you aimin' for sudden trouble?"

The direct questions appeared to hammer Tait into silence. Pat-Hand, shifting in the saddle, wondered what thoughts were brewing in that shrewd brain before him. It was like a tense moment among men ringed around the green baize, when you wondered what the other gent had in his hand. But whatever it was that Tait had in mind, he was trying a new tack.

He shrugged his huge shoulders and grinned.

"Reckon I was a mite het up, stranger. Pat-Hand Geary, you say your name is? You did kinda rub my pelt the wrong way, comin' up like a snortin' blue norther and tellin' it chipper that you got a tail-holt on Swingin' Q. Maybe I won't like it, exactly, but if Saunders wanted to get shed of his share, reckon it's his business. If we don't hit it off, maybe you'll sell out to me. Besides," he smiled thinly, as an odd look came into his eyes, "I like fast horses. That dun's second to none, feller, at eatin' up the miles. I can tell. Suppose you stick around, till I can talk you into sellin' him."

"Poker Face ain't up for sale or swap, ever," Pat-Hand said. "But I'm glad you're turnin' out to be a sort of obligin' hombre. I'm gittin' more hollow in the stummick by the minute. Maybeso you can wrassle us up a bait of grub."

"Sure, sure," agreed the other. "We'll git along." He added, in a queer tone: "Some folks thing I'm crazy. They'll tell you that. But I ain't. Sometimes they don't know what I'm talkin' about. But I do. Four ways from the ace. Know what it means, stranger? Ha, Ha! Of course you don't. Nobody around here does!"

Pat-Hand stared at him sharply. He was remembering what Cico Saunders had said as a parting shot: *"She's partway your layout now, Geary, and welcome to it! Only fair to tell you, you won't like some of the goin's-on. 'Specially Tait and his 'four ways from the ace.' Whatever it means!"*

Pat-Hand wasn't fooled a bit as he slid from the saddle. He knew he'd have to keep a wary eye on Kiley Tait. With painstaking care, he fed Poker Face and rubbed him down, before following Tait into the ranchhouse. Again Tait mentioned the horse as he started frying bacon.

"I'll pay a hundred dollars for him, Geary. I know horses! Train 'em in all the tricks. That bunch in the corral—they're fast, and ain't a one of 'em gun-shy. I like 'em fast. I can tell by Poker Face's trim lines that he's the swiftest thing on four feet. And I've got some powerful speedy saddlers. If a hundred bucks ain't enough—"

"Nope." Pat-Hand washed the grime from his face and groped for the towel. "No use dickerin' for that dun. Plumb priceless, he is, even if I did win him on a double-deuce bluff."

"Quite a poker player, ain't you?" asked Tait, as Pat-Hand started to eat.

"From away back," spoke up Pat-Hand between mouthfuls, making no attempt at modesty. "Enough so's it's kept the callouses offa my hands. Don't hafta work for a livin'. But I've allus had a hankerin' for raisin' horses, so maybe I'll see what it's like to blister and sweat and bend the old back." He gulped his Java, sighed his appreciation. "Takes a heap of guts, though, to buck a bunch of smart galoots with card savvy," he went on. "Got to know when and how to bluff 'em. Like standin' pat, for instance, on slim cards, when the table stake's sky limit! That last's why they got to callin' me Pat-Hand—

"Yep, Tait, play your pasteboards right, and you got the lil' old world by her twisted tail on a down-valley drag.

"Uh-huh, every stitch I own come by a turn of a card—hat, shirt, red flannels, pants, boots, .45! Some mighty interestin' gewgaws, lemme tell you, bob up in the pot sometimes! You wouldn't believe it. There was the time I settled for five gallons of Old Crow. Then, other times, there was a butter churn, a bale of hay, a litter of spotted pigs, and a rusty old flintlock. But this is the first time I ever got a slice of a horse ranch!"

HIS meal finished, Pat-Hand rode forth with Tait to look over the Swinging Q holdings. He liked what he saw. Whatever was behind Tait's oily front, Pat-Hand certainly had to give the devil his due. Kiley Tait knew horseflesh. The finest horses Pat-Hand had ever seen! Quarter horses that could turn on a dime. Arabian strain. Morgans. Pat-Hand had an idea he was going to like this new business.

Pat-Hand dug out a brown paper and twisted a cigarette, frowning. Menace rode this range, no mistake about it. He felt it at the home ranch, felt it riding alongside this horse-mad rancher. Certain matter needed looking into.

"First rate," he told Tait, as they swung back toward the house. "Right off, tomorrow mornin', I'm gonna roll up my

sleeves and go to work. Just now, though, I'm more interested in hornin' in on some long-neglected stud poker. Ain't been in a game since Tuesday night, and that's plumb calamitous for Pat-Hand Geary. Where-at's the nearest town?"

"Silverstrike," Tait clipped. "Ten miles. Can't miss it if you follow the valley south. Are you sure you don't want—"

But Pat-Hand was already lining Poker Face onto the town trail. It was sundown when he cantered the docile-looking dun down the main street of Silverstrike. Soon he found the sign he wanted. It proclaimed that before him was the Heyday Saloon and Gambling Emporium. More than poker was in Pat-Hand's mind, for once, as he slid from the stallion and clumped into the lavish layout.

After downing a rye, he quickly got into a game.

Long experience had taught him how to lose no time. While he played, Pat-Hand talked, and got answers. Hours passed, and liquor loosened tongues. Pat-Hand found out some things.

"So you're teamed up with Kiley Tait, huh?" asked a red-headed waddy named Johnny Purdum. "Man, I wouldn't want to be in your boots, not whatever. A man for horses, Tait is, but none to neighbor with!"

"What kinda gent is he?" Pat-Hand asked easily, looking at his cards.

"No one knows much about him," Purdum went on. "Only comes into town for supplies, or to close a horse deal. Last time I saw him, was the night of the big game, when he rode in for tobacco. But he ain't too well liked, for a fact. Cico Saunders, I hear, crossed with him, before yanking up his picket pin and poundin' the vamoose trail. Saunders was a warty old guy without much guts, anyway. Odd, them two was ever pardners. Plain, that Tait aims to be whole hog. Only one thing he lives for, seems— fast horses. Buys scads of 'em. Some folks figger he's a bit touched around the thinker, but I dunno. Say, does he ever mention 'four ways from the ace' to you?"

There it was again! Four ways from the ace! Kiley Tait's little joke. Pat-Hand felt his nerves tighten. He "raised" on a possible straight. Something grim, some sinister and shadowy fact, he was positive, lay behind his strange partner's crude attempt at humor.

"I shure got myself a half interest in hellfire and brimstone," mused Pat-Hand, mostly to himself.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Nothin'," Pat-Hand mumbled. "Nothin'. Nice little town you got. Silver minin', cattle and horses, huh?"

"Plumb peaceful round here, most of the time," nodded Ab Hooker, deputy sheriff, guardedly. "But if you ever pack away any poker winnin's from Silverstrike, hombre, watch you back! There was four gents hit it lucky here one night couple months ago. But ridin' through Long Tom Pass, just before daylight, they up and disappeared, like the earth had swallowed 'em up. Ain't cut sign on 'em yet, 'ceptin' their broncs was found driftin', one of 'em without saddlebags. It could happen to you."

Pat-Hand took in the pot. "Could," he allowed. "One of the hazards of playin' poker, gentlemen. Tell me more about them four unlucky galoots, Mr. Law-dog. Gotta catch up on Silverstrike history."

" 'Twas Puffy Allbright, for one," The lawman filled his glass. "Mayor of Silverstrike. Three was cowmen friends of Puffy's—Jonas Tucker, Sixty-Head Hamm and Dash Bricknell. Well, our genial mayor, 'specially, hit it damned lucky. First, and only, royal flush ever seen in this town! When the game busted up, all four went to Puffy's shack, beyond Long Tom Pass, to sorta celebrate that there royal flush. His hideaway shack, he called it. He kept his Kaintuck corn likker there. Far's we could figger out, they never reached there. Somewhere in the Pass, where the rocks don't leave no sign, somethin' happened. We don't know what. Like I say, hide or toenail ain't been seen of His Honor or his pards—"

"Right interestin' information," Pat-Hand cut in with murmuring tone. "I'll kind tuck it away for future reference. And now, seein' I won enough stacks of blues for one night, reckon I best hit saddle. Gotta git up bright and early and become a horse rancher." He smiled. " 'Less I'm a corpse before then!"

"Better watch out," piped Johnny Purdum. "She's a full moon, just like it was the night them four disappeared. Made to

order for an ambushin'. Take care of your back. You won't git another one."

"Thanks," Pat-Hand said. "Be around again sometime, when you hairpins have a payday."

Climbing his saddle, Pat-Hand Geary headed back through silver moonlight toward the Swinging Q, his new home. He didn't stick to the whitish, twisting ribbon of trail, but kept within the black shadows of trees and rocks. Back in town, Purdum, Hooker and others would be laying bets on whether Pat-Hand would come through this night with a whole skin. So Pat-Hand reckoned; his spine tingling a little. Once, he examined his Colt, making sure it was loaded, then shoving it back into its holster. It would be of sorry use, however, in case of a backshot.

MORE and more, Pat-Hand liked this friendly range. He grinned at the prospect of new happy-go-lucky companions. Here was the set-up he'd always wanted. Now, he could raise horses all week, and play poker in the Heyday on Saturday nights. Then, silently, he swore, felt a strange urge to track down this jackpot dilemma—that men might again play games in peace. Pat-Hand pulled out makin's, as he rode, then put them back. The red wink of a cigarette in the dark had sent more than one old ranny to boothill.

In the light of his new knowledge, about Silverstrike troubles, Pat-Hand tried to wedge Tait into the jigsaw. Four men had vanished seemingly from the face of the earth. What had happened to them? Tait gave the impression of hiding some ghoulish secret. Did Tait know something?

Riding slowly forward now, less than a mile from the ranch, Pat-Hand stiffened purposely in his kak. An unbending determination dwindled his eyes to fiery slivers. No more roaming for Pat-Hand Geary! Besides, he was getting old and it was high time he settled down. Raise horseflesh, by damn, or die trying! Had a right to a share of Swinging Q, didn't he? Legal, wasn't it? Maybe Tait wouldn't crowd him too much. But if he did cause trouble—well, Pat-Hand wasn't too old to take care of himself!

The round, eerie moon created the illusion of daylight as Pat-Hand halted on a hummock, a short distance from the ranch house. Grimly, he stroked Poker Face's mane. He looked down upon the ghostly place. He could see clearly the heads of horses bunched in one corner of the big corral. All was quiet. Remembering Purdum's and Hooker's warnings, musing that backbones were hard to replace, Pat-Hand proceeded downslope with foxlike caution. It was a game of dodging moonbeams now, while he mingled with meager shadows, managing to come close to the house, unseen. From long experience, Poker Face, too, maintained a silence, stepping as if the valley floor were made of glass. All the while, Pat-Hand was gun-conscious, ready to spring his Colt into action at first inkling of bushwhack-play.

On a creekbank, scant yards from the north side of the house, Pat-Hand eased from the saddle. Straining his extra sense, Pat-Hand made reasonably sure he wasn't blundering into an ambush, before cat-footing on. Now his gun was in his hand. He skirted a yard that was almost a white glare under the moon. He came up to an open window, peered inside. The next instant, he breathed easier, when a shaft of moonlight revealed the sleeping shape under the blanket. Pat-Hand chuckled under his breath. Tait, at least for the present, was of peaceful bent. Pat-Hand could unsaddle his Poker Face horse and grab some shut-eye undisturbed. He looked into the sky. Already a faint gray was in the east.

His chuckle turning into a soundless grin, Pat-Hand holstered his gun, led the dun toward the corral, opened the big gate and walked inside. He moved without that inner tension now. He smiled broadly, even winked at the moon. Pat-Hand Geary, up-and-coming cayuse breeder! As Poker Face gently nudged him, Pat-Hand chatted with him contentedly.

He started to turn to remove Poker Face's saddle. He never made it. At that moment, he wondered if he wasn't being torn wide open. It was short-lived wonder, for sudden, bewildering blackness swept over him.

During his groggy return to life, Pat-Hand found himself spread-eagled in the corral dirt. It amazed him he wasn't dead. He slowly realized someone had aimed

for his heart—and found the mark. For that was where pain was a throbbing flame. He shook his head, steadying the whirling world, and began to check on his predicament. He decided he'd been out only minutes, because the paling eastern sky didn't look much different. Then he noted his deck of cards, which were spilling from his left shirt-pocket. In that instant, he thanked his yen for the game. Gratefully he squinted at a bullet that had stopped halfway through the deck of fifty-two pasteboards!

So that was why he was still alive! Whoever had shot him, would think he was already a boothill candidate. The gent, who'd somehow outguessed Pat-Hand, must've been close, waiting to line his sights so he wouldn't hit the horses. It puzzled Pat-Hand that the horses had stayed bunched and quiet, until he remembered Tait had trained them to be steady around gunshot. Pat-Hand, scowling blackly, fingered scattered cards around him. He palmed a black ace in his hand, absently, while he lay in the same position. Of a sudden, a brow-raising bolt of complete understanding ripped through him. He decided to continue as a corpse until his would-be killer showed his hand.

RED dawn marched across the rangeland sky ahead of a dragging sun which hadn't yet toiled above treeless crests. Pat-Hand saw him coming now. Kiley Tait had his six-gun drawn as he warily footed his way to the corral. He came out of the buckbrush farther along the creek. It was light enough to see the triumphant glitter in Tait's slitted eyes. The man's mouth curled in a treacherous smile. Pat-Hand had the ugly thought that Tait would stand over him and pour a second shot into him just to make sure. Sweat flecked Pat-Hand's forehead, he stirred uneasily. He closed his eyes; then immediately let a tiny sliver of light through the left one.

When the hulking shape of Kiley Tait towered over him, Pat-Hand appeared no longer an uncaring corpse. Fast as a rattlesnake's fangs, he gathered himself in a blurring upward lunge. Pat-Hand closed a fist around the other's gun wrist, and a single wrench brought a howl out of Tait as he dropped the weapon. In midair, Pat-Hand's scooping right hand seized it and he jabbed the barrel into Tait's paunch, staggering him backwards. Thunderstruck, Tait elevated his arms.

"Figgered a surprise play would take this pot, Tait!" Pat-Hand muttered icily. "Now I savvy what it's all about, the way you run a blazer on the Silverstrike starpackers. *Four ways from the ace*—it comes to me what you meant by that, you bushwhackin' coyote. Layin' there in the middle of the corral, staring at that ace in my hand, I got the answer. Tait, with your help, I'm solvin' Silverstrike's biggest mystery. Get a shovel!"

Tait looked as if he wanted to make a sudden lunge for the leveled Colt and settle the little matter with Pat-Hand Geary for all time. But he didn't. Glaring balefully, and saying nothing, he backed off a few steps; then turned and walked reluctantly toward the barn. Pat-Hand followed.

The two returned to the corral, Tait carrying the shovel.

"Now, dig!" Pat-Hand commanded. *"At each of them corner posts, Tait!"*

Kiley Tait stood there, shovel clutched tensely. There was a dull click as Pat-Hand cocked the Colt, a thunderclap sound in the early silence. That was enough to set Tait to digging. While the sun soared above the bald peak far to eastward, Tait's curses rent the morning chill as a pile of dirt went high and a hole went deep. Wary, with his finger hard against the trigger, hot-blooded Pat-Hand stood waiting. He was poised in a steely stance.

The digging went on till Tait unearthed what Pat-Hand knew now he would see. He shot a quick look down and up. The thing was there! Cold and hard became the gaze he bent upon Tait. He gripped the gun more tightly. Tait stepped back, his stark fear obviously riding him with sharp rowels. Pat-Hand advanced on him with grim deliberation. The slow move made Tait turn pale.

"Four ways from the ace," Pat-Hand repeated. He halted, bracing himself before the other squarely. "Got to hand it to you at that, Kiley Tait. You played your cards careful and had everybody sandied. Best poker playin' I've seen in a month of moons. So them four hombres that hit jackpots over Silverstrike way didn't just

disappear. They was shot at from ambush! You killed 'em, Tait, droppin' 'em from their saddles as they rode that night through Long Tom Pass. You wanted the dinero Puffy Allbright was totin' in his saddlebags, and I see the reason why. Fast horses. You're plumb loco 'long that line. But however you stack up as all-round horse expert, you're a skunk just the same. You'd kill, do anything, to get hold of horses."

Pat-Hand's words roared on. "Got a kick out of flabbergastin' the few folks you met, huh, always spoutin' off about 'four ways from the ace.' Reckoned nobody was smart enough to dope it out, eh? Well, maybe nobody'd ever knowed, you back-bitin' polecat, if you hadn't tried to heart-shoot me here in the corral. Four ways, I savvied then, meant four corner-posts. Each one toppin' a grave!

"Why'd you go to all that trouble?" His tone was measured, metallic now, like clock ticks. "Because no tin badge in a thousand years would think to look under them posts! Fittin' markers to their memory, seein' drygulch mazuma woulda stocked your corral. Right handy, too, since Swingin' Q ain't too far from Long Tom Pass. No corpses, no hangnoose! But, like a lot of killin' gents, you had to brag a little, in your own way. Four ways from the ace is fixin' that rope right round your gullet. You got more work ahead of you, hombre, openin' up three more graves. But first off, I'm uncommon curious about that there center ace. That's where you're diggin' next. In the middle of the corral!"

Pat-Hand knew that if he relaxed his vigilance, a fifth murder would be in the offing. He kept Tait covered well. For fifteen minutes Tait dug. At last he paused for breath before the hole he'd made. Pat-Hand risked a glance, saw what he'd expected. Saddlebags full of poker money! Coin and greenbacks! On the top of the bags, the ace of spades! The death card, final touch to Tait's grim attempt at humor. Death for whoever should discover Kiley Tait's secret!

AS if in proof of this, something struck at Pat-Hand in that splintered flash before he could swivel his eyes back to Tait. He staggered, blinded. Tait had thrown a shovelful of dirt into his face. Fool that Pat-Hand had been for shifting his attention! He tried to bring the gun up for a wild shot at a body he couldn't see.

The shovel blade struck his gun arm. The Colt went flying. Struggling to see, he tensed against Tait's next move. It came, as Pat-Hand felt his own gun roughly leave leather. Any instant, he expected to feel hot lead ripping through him. Tait spoke while Pat-hand batted his paining, dirt-filled eyes.

"Here's one stack of blue chips you didn't rake in, Pat-Hand Geary!" Tait taunted thinly. "Cold-decked you this time, filling' a couple burlaps with horsefeed and puttin' 'em to bed! You stopped playin' it smart then, and I drawed a bead on you. Well, you snoopy old range bum, what you know won't do you no damned good. The game's all over for you. Then I'll have Swingin' Q to myself, like I planned it when Cico Saunder was in the way. Only wanted Saunders' money to get the place started, anyway. But first off, I got a chore for you, so the killin' can wait.

"It's your turn with the shovel. Done all the diggin' I intend to. Before you check in for keeps, you're fillin' up them holes. You're makin' everything look just like it was. Then you're diggin' another hole, at the halfway post—for yourself. I'll be right glad to fill that one in. Funny as hell when you think of it. I can still have my little joke. Only it'll be *five* ways from the ace now!"

Blinking his throbbing eyes, Pat-Hand at last commanded a blurry vision. He could see the grinning face of his captor. The gun in Tait's hand was trained on one of Pat-Hand's shirt buttons. Tait's own gun lay on the ground. Pat-Hand's jaw and mouth became bowstring taut, then flint-hard. He realized this was the showdown hand—and Tait held all the aces in the deck. Of a sudden, Pat-Hand remembered how he'd once stood pat on a pair of deuces, and won a horse named Poker Face!

"You ain't got time." Pat-Hand was squinting wryly at the sun, now swinging high. "Just remembered a gent named Ab Hooker's ridin' in most any minute now. You know Ab. Deputy sheriff. Me and him got to talkin' horses last night. Ab's got a ride to make this way, so he said he'd

stop by and have breakfast. Might be in a dickerin' mood, after he has a look-see at our corral full of broncs. So, there ain't time to fill in them holes, Tait."

"You're lyin'!" Tait rasped. "You—"

"Am I?" Pat-Hand smiled mirthlessly. "Botherin' you a heap, ain't it, that you can't be sure? If Ab really shows his face, and you ain't covered up sign, it means a noose for you—"

"NO it won't, you meddlin' old fool!" blazed Tait, backing away a step. He stooped, picked up the dead mayor's saddlebags, flung them across Poker Face. He straightened, rested his left hand on the dun's saddlehorn. "Because I'm travelin' long and fast! I'm takin' your Poker Face cayuse, Pat-Hand. I know horses better'n anybody round Silverstrike. Know Poker Face's the fastest thing on four legs I've ever seen. He'll outrun anything Ab Hooker or anyone else might be forkin'. All saddled and ready, Poker Face's gonna be my getaway 'cross the badlands. Someplace, where I ain't known, I'll get started again, on poker plunder! I'll have thousands of horses! All right, nosey gent, stand and take it! The chips're down!" He laughed darkly. "Cash in, Pat-Hand!"

As he flung this final taunt, Tait was rising to saddle. Now the gun'd boom. Pat-Hand would drop in his tracks. Tensing himself for Tait's bullet, Pat-Hand was recalling something that had happened right after a poker game a long time ago. Would it happen again?

It did! Pat-Hand forgot all about the sting in his eyes, and his heart galloped with unbridled joy. For no sooner had Tait hit leather, than a sad-eyed Poker Face came alive. The inner demon in him cropped out with vicious suddenness, as a bland-looking horse bucked and wheeled and twisted. Tait lost his gun. His hat flew wide. Desperately, he hung on and rattled.

Poker Face carried him all around the corral, ramming him against rails, going into all sorts of shapes. It was a short ride. Poker Face, humping high and swapping ends, tossed his rider.

Unhurt, Tait scrambled for a fallen Colt, was leaping to his feet. But Pat-Hand had dashed forward. Before Tait could trigger, Pat-Hand's huge, knotted right drove for the point of Tait's chin. Tait went staggering. Pat-Hand brought home another crushing blow to the same target, and Tait sat down heavily, dazed. This time Pat-Hand made sure of his man by trussing him securely with a rope.

"Figgered you'd swallow that Ab Hooker yarn and rise to the getaway bait. Now I'll take you to Ab in town," Pat-Hand murmured. "Pity he ain't got four ropes to hang you with! Know horses forwards, backwards and sideways, huh? But there stands one cayuse that did outbluff you, Tait, makin' it safe again for the card-lovin' gents of Silverstrike. Peaceful-lookin' as hell, Poker Face is, but a sure-enough blue-chip gambler! You see, same thing happened to me, right after I got him with that pair of deuces. Thought Poker Face a cinch, but he sure showed me. Talk about hell in the saddle! He took me for the devil's own ride. After a dozen tries, I got that horse hewn down to my size.

"'Cordin' to that there contract, reckon I'll be sole owner of this spread now." He chuckled. "Means I gotta spit on my hands and pitch in with all fours, because she's a big outfit for handlin'. But I guess I'll come out on top, at that, like I allus have. Hell, life's just a big poker game, anyway."

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LEND ME A LOCOED GUN-HAND

By MARVIN J. JONES

The gleaming guns of the fast-draw drifter were for hire . . . to the highest bidder. The deal was made . . . and Boothill solemnly cold-decked the play.

THE STARS twinkled brightly over the waterhole, giving the mucky water an oily sheen. The cottonwoods stood stark and silent, with not a breeze to stir their leaves. The huddle of blankets, well back from the dying fire, was just as motionless.

Into the moon splashed clearing moved a distorted shadow—the crouched figure of a man. In one hand the man carried a handful of twigs and leaves. In the other, the moonlight gleamed on the naked barrel of a forty-five. On noiseless feet, the man approached the embers of the fire, dropped the leaves and twigs on it, then moved back to sit on a fallen tree. He waited until the tinder flared, then leveled the six-gun at the huddle of blankets. He pulled back

the hammer slowly . . . very slowly.

"Pilgrim," he said, in a conversational voice. "I want to talk to you."

"Go ahead," came a voice.

The man on the tree trunk stiffened and the muzzle of his gun dropped. The second voice had not come from the pile of blankets. It had come from directly behind the fallen tree.

"Toss your gun over on the blankets."

The first man complied and a lean, wide shouldered figure moved out of the shadows, went over to the blanket roll and sat down. He wore two guns tacked to his lean hips.

"You were a long time coming," the lean man observed, his voice pleasant, now, almost friendly.

"You expected me, then?"

"Why, yes," said the lean man easily, who was known down on the Border as the Paso Kid. "You watched me all afternoon with a spyglass as I came along the valley floor. After all that attention I figured you'd pay me a visit." The Paso Kid added kindling to the fire and the growing light revealed him to be in his late twenties, with a face as lean as his body. His eyes were grey, his mouth thin lipped but good natured.

His visitor was older, heavier, but trim and strong. His lips were full and petulant, giving him the plaintive look of a child. Now, he sighed.

"You are patient," he told the Paso Kid. "You should have been sleeping soundly. I came up like a flitting ghost, not disturbing a twig or rustling a leaf. It was a great disappointment. Even that magnificent stallion of yours did not warn you of my coming."

"I held his nose," the Paso Kid said, chuckling.

"You embarrass me," the older man complained and then added. "I suppose you want an explanation."

"You were the one who wanted to talk," countered the Kid.

"So I was. So I was," admitted the other. "But now, I hardly know where to begin. I'm at a disadvantage. To be truthful, I came seeking assistance. Ah, sir! I see incredulity in your face! Believe me, that was my purpose."

"And if I refused, all you had to do was let go the hammer," commented the Paso Kid, slapping his twin holsters.

"Ah, sir, that was not it at all!" protested his visitor. "It was only that I had to ask you several general questions—very general. Sound you out, as it were."

"Sound away," the Kid told him.

"I'll tell you this first," said the other. "If your answers were satisfactory, I was prepared to make you an offer. A very generous one, I might say."

"I'm listening," the Paso Kid said, as the other hesitated.

"FIRST," his visitor said. "Are you well known in this part of the country?"

"I'm not known at all," the Paso Kid said, truthfully enough.

"Good! Now, sir, I consider myself a judge of men. You are young. That is obvious. Also, I think you might be both restless and reckless. I wager you would be interested in an unusual task."

The Paso Kid dropped a handful of twigs on the fire. "I'm still listening," he said, after a moment.

"All right," his visitor went on. "Now tell me this—for a thousand dollars would you assume another man's name and enter into any situation that might have to do with that identity, taking any chances that migh come up?"

"For what period of time?" asked the Kid.

"A week."

"I would."

"Then," his visitor said decisively. "I shall tell you my story!

"My name is Roy Beadle. I am not a brave man. Nor am I a clever one. Also, I am not a fighter. My talents do not run in that direction. I do have, I must say, a talent for making money. I own several ranches and one of them I bought from an Englishman named Stockwell. This ranch bears the Sandal brand. Stockwell, himself, lived in the East, and one Jess Harlow ran the ranch for him. I sent a man to check on the ranch at the time I purchased it and the report he gave me was good. The ranch was in capable hands and was making money."

"Then, it stopped making money," the Paso Kid suggested, as the other paused.

"No," answered Roy Beadle, "It wasn't as bad as that. The last three years it

hasn't done as well as it should, but Jess Harlow, the manager, his reports have given detailed explanations. What really upset me was that his last report hinted of expected trouble between homesteaders and ranchers in the valley. I decided to visit the valley and look into the situation. I wrote to Jess Harlow and gave him the date I expected to arrive. I received in return a more than courteous letter saying he looked forward to my coming. Then, the day before I left, I received this."

Beadle fished a square of paper out of his pocket and passed it over. The Paso Kid unfolded it and read its brief message. It was written in a penciled scrawl. *"Stay out of Rico!"* was all it said. It was unsigned. The Kid handed it back.

"Do you think your manager sent it?" he asked the other.

The older man shrugged. "Frankly, sir, I have no idea. Anyway, tomorrow is the day Jess Harlow expects me. I started with the idea that I would ride in under an assumed name, rather than be on the stage. Today, as I waited, my nerve began to fail me. Then, seeing you riding this way, noting your appearance, gave me the idea of hiring a man familiar with the ways of the West. A man, shall we say, of your apparent talents."

The Paso Kid's lips twitched in a smile. "And what do you expect of me, exactly, Beadle?"

His visitor spread his hands. "I want you to ride on into Rico, introduce yourself to Jess Harlow, explaining that you decided to ride into town rather than travel on the stage. Once he takes you out to the ranch, I expect you to keep your eyes and ears open and find out what the trouble is. At the end of a week you'll meet me at this same location and I will give you a thousand dollars and wish you Godspeed. On your findings, I will then take what action I deem necessary."

"It sounds simple," the Paso Kid smiled.

"I hope that it will be!" Beadle held out his hand. "A week from today, then."

"Right." The Paso Kid shook the proffered hand.

Morning found the Paso Kid in the saddle and well away from the waterhole. He struck a river and a well traveled trail that paralleled its banks. He rode warily, but not from a premonition of danger, rather as an established habit. There came a gradual rise to the trail, a flattening at the top, and then the Paso Kid could look down into the next valley that housed the town of Rico.

THE trail forked before it started down hill. As the stallion approached he tossed his head nervously. The Kid reined in sharply as he saw the reason. From the trunk of a tree hung the body of a man. His head was held at an awkward angle by the clumsy hangman's knot tied under the left ear. The Kid stepped out of the staddle and approached the hanged man.

He felt the dead man's leg and found it rigid. He stepped around to the other side and looked up at the waxen face. There was a placard on the dead man's chest. Printed boldly across the face of it was the cryptic word NEXT? But it was something sprawled directly underneath that brought a grunt from the Paso Kid. It was the name *Roy Beadle.*

The Paso Kid frowned, then hunkered down on his heels, pulled tobacco and papers from a vest pocket and carefully began a cigarette. When he had licked it shut, he spoke out.

"Son, I wish you'd stop pointing that gun at me. You're making me nervous as hell."

There was a startled movement in the brush. Silence. Then a teen aged youth emerged and came cautiously into the clearing. His smooth face was flushed, but the muzzle of the old Sharps he carried centered steadily at the point where the Kid's gunbelts crossed.

"You must have eyes like a hawk, Mister," the boy said, with reluctant respect, then added firmly. "What's your name and what's your business?"

The Paso Kid suppressed a smile.

"Where's your paw and where's your manners?" he countered.

The flush in the other's face deepened. His voice rose.

"Don't be giving me a runaround, Mister!" he warned angrily. He stepped forward and brought the muzzle of the Sharps up so that it yawned in the Kid's face. "You ain't in any position to ask questions!"

"Aren't in any position," corrected the Paso Kid gently. "You ought to be in school studying grammar instead of throwing down on strangers."

The rifle trembled in the boy's hands and his forefinger curled on the trigger. Alarm came into the Paso Kid's face. His left arm shot out, his hand closed on the barrel of the Sharps and he twisted the rifle from the boy's hands. The gun went off with a thunderous bellow that brought a shower of twigs down on the two of them. The Kid's right arm went around the boy, pinning the youngster's arms to his sides.

"Now," said the Paso Kid grimly. "You've got a licking coming."

The youngster struggled to get free, but the Kid's arm tightened remorselessly, bringing the boy's blazing eyes within inches of his own. His mouth, grim, the Kid tossed the rifle to one side, brought his left arm around and over the boy's shoulders and flipped him face downward. As the youngster wriggled frantically across his knees, the Paso Kid brought his right hand up. Then, he held it there, a gradual expression of alarm spreading over his face and the muscles along his jaw loosening. The boy squirmed free from the suddenly lax arm and stepped backward, face a fiery red.

The Paso Kid's own tanned face and neck were flushed. He picked up the Sharps, unloaded it and handed it over.

"A fine thing!" he mumbled gruffly. "A girl carrying on like that!"

THE girl's legs suddenly buckled and she knelt on the ground. She bent over in a tight huddle, her face buried in her hands and her shoulders shaking with great gusty sobs. The Paso Kid shifted from one foot to the other, concerned and awkward, but still shaken from discovering the boy was a girl.

"Do you know this—man?" he asked finally.

The girl nodded. "Jim Berry, my uncle."

"And you were hiding here, thinking the men who did it would come back?"

"Yes."

"Who do you think did it?"

"The Sandal crowd!" the girl said bitterly.

"Why?"

"We're nesters," the girl said, as though that explained the whole danged mess.

The Paso Kid sighed. The girl picked up the rifle and turned toward the brush where she had been hidden. The Kid followed her as she went to a chunky, work hardened mare and gathered up the reins.

"Who wrote Roy Beadle's name on that sign?" the Kid asked.

"I did," the girl said sullenly.

"Why?"

"He owns the Sandal ranch. He's on his way out here and he's going to lead the ranchers against the nesters. And we're waiting for him!"

The Paso Kid reached for the mare's reins. "Wait a minute!" he ordered the girl. "I—"

But the girl kicked the mare and wrenched the reins from his hand. The mare went down the trail at a clumsy gallop.

The Paso Kid rode down into Rico in the heat of midday. There was a tension in the town, it was plain. The Kid saw a sign PERRY HOTEL and next to it a sign that said, PEABODY'S — ANYBODY'S BAR. He hesitated and then turned the stallion into the hitchrail. He stepped from the saddle, trailed the reins over the rail and pushed through the batwings.

There were two men at the bar. One was a handsome, heavyset man in his forties, the other younger, lanky and bony faced. The bartender stood in front of them, looking at a huge silver watch that he had fished out from under his apron.

"Five minutes yet, Jess," the barkeep said cheerfully, replaced the watch and came down to where the Kid stood.

"A beer," the Kid told him.

At the sound of his voice, the heavyset man, called Jess, turned and stared at him. His gaze traveled down and interest came into his eyes as he saw the twin guns.

"Looking for a job, Mister?" he asked.

The Kid shook his head. "No, thanks."

"I can use another hand," said the heavyset man, coming toward the Kid.

"Not interested." The man frowned and turned back to his companion.

From the street came a rumbling of wheels and hoofs, popping whip and a rebel yell.

"There's Tim now," said the bartender.

Jess and his companion went outside. The Paso Kid finished his beer and followed. The stage was coming to a sliding, creaking halt in front of the hotel. The driver climbed down from the seat and Jess and his lanky companion approached him.

"No passengers?" Jess inquired, frowning.

"Nary a one," returned the driver, loosing a black stream of spittle. "Who you looking for?"

"Roy Beadle," Jess told him.

"That's me," the Paso Kid said softly, stepping forward.

Jess' jaw dropped, as did that of his companion, but he recovered quickly. He held out his hand, his teeth white beneath the black mustache.

"I'm Jess Harlow, Mr. Beadle, and this is Lanky Edwards, the Sandal foreman. We thought you would be on the stage."

The Paso Kid shook hands.

"Don't like them," he explained briefly.

"Don't blame you, Mr. Beadle!" Jess Harlow said heartily, and then added. "I figured you'd be some tired so I made you reservations at the hotel in case you wanted to rest up before going out to the ranch."

"I'd just as soon go out now," the Kid said easily.

"Good enough," the ranch manager agreed readily. "We'll stop by and cancel them."

They went by the hotel, leaving the lanky foreman in town to purchase some supplies and then set out for the Sandal. The Paso Kid interrupted the manager's small talk, as they rode up the valley.

"Do you know a man named Jim Berry?" he asked him.

"Yes, I know him," Jess Harlow said calmly. "In fact, we've had some trouble with him. He took up a strip of land where we specifically told him he could not settle. He's a stubborn sort."

"Not anymore," the Kid said.

"What do you mean."

"He's dead," the Paso Kid told him.

HARLOW seemed so genuinely astonished that the Kid supplied the details. "Just what is the situation here in the valley, anyway?" he asked the ranch manager.

Jess Harlow's face had set in a scowl as he listened. "I wish I knew—for sure, Mr. Beadle. But I can guess pretty close! A lot of squatters have moved into the valley in the last three years—and where they've settled, cattle have a way of disappearing. We've lost some, but not bad, yet. We haven't been able to keep the nesters out, but we've told them where to settle and where not to—except for Jim Berry. I don't know who strung him up, but I know why!"

"Why?"

"Well, the rest of the ranchers have had more trouble than we—so far—and we've kept out of the fight. There've been a couple of killings and the Sandal is going to be blamed for this one. Either the other ranchers strung him up to get us involved, or some of the nesters—to give them an excuse to move on us."

The two men rode on in silence for some distance and then the ranch manager swung away from the trail and struck across country.

"We'll take a swing around," he explained to the Kid. "I want to take a look at the creek flats."

A half hour later, they topped a rise and looked down on a narrow ribbon of water.

"Damn!" Harlow exploded, looking downward.

The Paso Kid looked too. Down in the bottom of the flats were two homesteader's cabins. A mile and a half farther down was the charred remains of a third.

"That was Jim Berry's place," Harlow explained. "He just got it built. God knows what happened to his family!"

"How come the other two weren't bothered?" asked the Kid.

"They've been here for years," Harlow explained. "We had it out with them at the start. We put it up to them. If anybody else moved in, everybody would go. They've helped discourage others—and guarded that pass, too. You can see how easy it would be for the wrong people to funnel Sandal cattle through that pass."

"Maybe they're responsible for Jim Berry," the Kid suggested.

Jess Harlow shook his head. "I don't think so. They would have come to me first."

The Paso Kid came out of his room the

next morning to find Harlow on his way up the stairs.

"I was just going to call you, Mr. Beadle, and see if you wanted to take a turn around the ranch with me."

The Kid agreed. They breakfasted and then went to the corral after horses. They rode due south over rolling grazeland for nearly two hours before Harlow drew rein at the crest of a hill.

"Take a look down there," he told the Kid.

The Kid leaned forward in his saddle. Squatter's cabins were generously sprinkled over that portion of the valley.

"Beyond that is the Circle Arrow," Harlow explained. "They've lost half their cattle since that colony settled. Those squatters are sitting on dynamite right now—and I think they know it!"

While they looked, a horseman rode from among the cabins and came up the hill toward them. Jess Harlow shaded his eyes and then turned to the Paso Kid.

"Sheriff Bradshaw," he said.

The lawman was a lean, spare man in his early fifties. A grizzled mustache drooped down either side of his mouth. His face was taciturn. He acknowledged the introduction to the Paso Kid with interest.

"So you're Roy Beadle," he said, and then added. "I allus figgered you'd be an Easterner."

"Any trouble down there?" Harlow interrupted.

The lawman wagged his head. "Just down asking some questions about Jim Berry. They're some excited."

"And they're blaming the Sandal!" Harlow suggested sourly.

The Sheriff nodded. "There's a funny slant to it though," he said, his eyes still studying the Kid. "They got the idea that Mr. Beadle here is running the show now."

"The dammed grubbers!" Harlow exploded angrily and then turned in his saddle and spoke to the Kid. "You sort of represent the ranch system to them, Mr. Beadle, being an absentee owner and all. But, knowing how they feel, I hope you'll stay near the ranch buildings while you're here and not ride by yourself."

The Sheriff nodded his head slowly. "Yep," he assented thoughtfully. "Don't know if I'd care to be in your shoes, Mr. Beadle, the way things are shaping up."

The Kid grinned. "There's only one solution," he said cheerfully, "the way I see it. And that's to get at the bottom of the rustling in this valley. I think the rest will clear up by itself."

The two men stared at him. Harlow's face was enigmatic, but Sheriff Bradshaw's flickered again with the calculating interest he had shown when they first met.

The Paso Kid's eye had been caught by something down on the floor of the valley. He reached his hand back into a saddle bag and brought out a pair of field glasses. He looked down at one of the sprawling squatter shacks and then replaced the glasses, not offering them to the other two men. The Kid grinned.

"Your advice is probably good," he told them, "but as long as my name is being booted around down there, I'm going to find out why."

Alarm crossed Harlow's face.

"It isn't wise, Mr. Beadle. You have no idea how bitter those people are."

The Kid shrugged.

"I'll go with you," Harlow offered. "I can't let you go alone."

The Kid shook his head. "Thanks just the same," he said cheerfully. "I'll mosy around on my own. Chances are, they'l' never know who I am."

"Don't count on that," Harlow warned him. "You were in town yesterday and word gets around fast."

"I'll take the chance," the Kid said. He left the two men and rode down the hill. When he reached the bottom, he turned in his saddle and saw the two separate and go their respective ways.

HE CIRCLED the homesteader's shack that he had singled out with the field glasses and then rode up to it at a walk, approaching from a blind side. He dismounted in its shadow and stepped around the corner. His face showed no surprise as he confronted the girl who had tried to salivate him with the Sharps the day before. Her face was flushed with exertion and brown ringlets of hair clung moistly against her forehead.

The girl's eyes widened as she saw him. The blood drained from her face, slowly.

She whirled from the clothesline and ran toward the shanty. The Kid intercepted her. He took off his hat.

"Good morning," he said gravely.

The girl came to an abrupt stop, panting.

"You—you—" she began and then choked off the words.

There was a small, scuffling movement from inside the shack. The Kid sidestepped and his lean fingers flicked downward.

"Don't do it, Mister!" a hoarse voice advised.

The Kid stiffened, relaxed and then turned slowly, smiling at the look of triumph in the girl's eyes. A stocky, heavy shouldered man stepped from the cabin. He cradled a double barreled shotgun in work-hardened hands. His face was flushed with fever and his eyes were glassy, but his fingers clutched the gun so hard the backs of them were white.

"Who is he, June?" the man asked.

The girl spat out the name. "Roy Beadle!" she said, the loathing emphasis she placed on it made the Kid jump.

Hate came into the fever ridden face of the nester and the muzzle of the shotgun jerked.

"What's he doing here, June? What's he want?"

The questions brought sanity back into the girl's eyes and a certain bewilderment. She looked around the flats, as though expecting a horde of burning and pillaging riders to sweep down among them.

"I'm a stranger to this valley," the Kid reminded them, his voice gentle. "I want to find out what's going on in this valley—and who's responsible."

The man weaved. He was clearly out on his feet. The sweat beading his forehead was evidence of the effort that kept him from collapse.

"Whispers—threats — murder! That's what's going on!" he said thickly. He reeled. Then his stocky legs suddenly bent.

The Kid stepped forward and plucked the shotgun from the lax fingers. He handed it to the girl with one hand, caught the nester's limp body in the circle of his other arm and strode into the cabin. He laid him down on the bed, covered him and silently felt his pulse. Still not looking at the girl, he went outside and got a small bottle from his saddle bags.

When he turned back to the cabin, the girl was standing near him, the shotgun in her hands. He brushed past her coldly and returned to the sick man, getting a dipper of water from a bucket on a bench.

"Here," the Kid said brusquely, handing the fevered man the dipper and two white pills.

The nester took them in his trembling hands and the Kid propped him up so that he could swallow. Then, the Paso Kid let him lay back again, took the dipper from him and handed it to the girl.

"He'll be all right in a few days," he told the girl. "I'll leave some of these. Give him a couple tonight and then a couple morning and night until he's back on his feet."

June stared at him wordlessly, a tangle of emotions on her face.

"Sit down," the Kid said softly.

The girl sank down into a chair, her eyes never wavering from his face.

"NOW," the Kid said, a trace of grimness in his voice. "I know what you think. What I want to know—is why you think it. Who told you that Roy Beadle is your enemy?"

"Everybody knows that," the girl said dully.

Irritation came into the Paso Kid's eyes, but his voice was gentle.

"Why didn't your uncle settle here near you folks instead of going up to the end of the valley?"

June's fingers plucked aimlessly at the chair arm. "He said all hell was going to bust loose around here. He thought it would be better there."

"And you think the Sandal was responsible for his death?"

"They—they— the girl began and then added sullenly. "I don't know."

The Kid stared at her helplessly. "What about the other two families of nesters that live at the end of the valley. Maybe they resented your uncle moving in."

June shook her head, not answering.

"It ain't we'uns that's doing the rustling!" the sick man said suddenly. "But we're going to suffer for it!"

The Kid went over to the bed. "Who *is* doing it?" he asked.

The nester opened his eyes. He chuckled in his delirium. "They didn't fool Jim none," he said and then the cunning went out of his face and lines of fear came in. "I-I don't know," he said wearily, and closed his eyes.

Neither the girl nor the man moved or spoke as the Paso Kid left the shack and swung into the saddle. As he rode back up the hill, the Kid was conscious of a prickling sensation in his backbone, as though a rifle was sighted on it and a hesitant finger was curved on the trigger. Relief came into his face as he crossed over the crest of the hill.

Once out of sight of the valley floor, the Paso Kid set the stallion toward the valley's end. When he reached a point near where he and the ranch manager had viewed the charred remains of Jim Berry's cabin, he left the stallion in a brush' filled gully.

Taking his field glasses, he wormed his way to the top of the rise and put them to his eyes, From time to time, he took them away and waited. Finally, his patience was rewarded. A lean whip of a man came out of one of the cabins and went to the corral nearby. He saddled a horse, stopped by the cabin for two bulging saddle bags, remounted and rode toward the pass. The Kid watched him until his gaze was attracted by another movement.

A woman had come out of the cabin. She carried a hoe in her hands. Long, black, braided hair was skinned back from her head. A red petticoat swished around her bare legs as she walked. An exclamation left the Kid's lips. A white man had ridden toward the pass, but the woman in the field below was Indian—Apache!

The Kid rolled over and sat up. As he did a bullet ripped into the ground where he had been lying. The Kid swore and rolled again. Dirt spouted up around him, with the pop of far away reports. Another ten seconds and the Kid was down in the gully where the stallion stood ground-reined. He whipped the Winchester from the saddle scabbard and snaked his way up to the lip of the gully.

Screened by a fringe of brush, he swept the opposite crest with the field glasses. Then he laid the glasses aside and thrust the muzzle of the Winchester forward. He sighted carefully, held his breath and exerted a steady squeeze on the trigger. His shoulder jerked to the recoil. On the opposite hill, a bush quivered and was still.

The Paso Kid slid back down the slope, mounted and rode over. He looked down on the dead man, then stepped from the saddle and rolled the boy over. There was no surprise on the Kid's face when he saw who it was. It was the Sandal foreman, Lanky Edwards.

The Paso Kid's lips were grim as he swung back into the saddle and loped away. He made a half circle around the two cabins and headed for the pass into which the homesteader had disappeared. As he neared it, he rode warily, his eyes searching out the ground and probing the boulder-strewn slopes on either side.

A short distance in from the mouth of the pass, the tell-tale tracks slanted abruptly toward a towering sliver of rock against the pass wall. With the hoof marks to guide him, he rode cautiously around the sliver of rock, around a second huge boulder and found himself at the entrance to a box canyon. As he rode on he spotted a cabin and an immense pole corral set back to the left. Three horses were ground-reined in front of the cabin. A fourth was in the corral.

The Paso Kid drew rein sharply, setting the stallion back on his hind feet. At the same time, the door of the cabin opened and the lean nester whom he had trailed came out. The man stood, mouth agape, for seconds and then dug frantically for the forty-five that hugged his leg. The Kid flipped out his right hand gun and flung a shot toward the man, then spun the stallion, spurring back to the canyon mouth. From behind him came yells and curses.

WHEN the Kid was back in the narrow opening of the canyon, he flung himself from the saddle, slapped the stallion on the flank and scrambled up among the boulders overlooking the entrance. He drew the long Colts from their holsters and rubbed the barrels against his thighs. He didn't have long to wait. There were shouted orders, a volley of profanity, then the clang of shod hooves on rock. Three riders came boiling through the mouth of the canyon. As they rounded the outcropping of rock, they saw the crouched

figure of the Kid and the long, slanting Colts.

The next instant, the mouth of the canyon was a roaring hell of blasting guns, curses, and the screams of frightened horses. Lead ricochetted around the Kid as he cocked and fired the Colts. Two riders were blasted from their saddles. They hit the trail like rag dolls. The third lurched in his saddle and then swung to the far side of his horse, dropping his gun. As he raced past, the Kid sighted along one of the long barrels and then dropped the hammer with his thumb. His face was regretful, but he couldn't bring himself to drive a slug into the man's broad back.

The Paso Kid slid down from the boulder and edged his way to a position to where he could observe the cabin. He watched for several minutes, then satisfied, he mounted and rode over. He slid out one of the Colts, though, as he kicked the door open. He glanced swiftly around the cabin, and dropped the gun back in its holster. He stepped across the room, grinning, to the man who was tied to a heavy chair.

Beneath a week's growth of beard, the bound man was ashen pale. His eyes were blackened, his lips swollen and there was an ugly bruise on his temple. His clothes, dirty and torn, were obviously Eastern.

"You're Roy Beadle, aren't you?" the Kid asked, beginning to untie the man.

The man nodded dumbly and the frightened hopelessness in his eyes gradually gave way to relief and joy.

"Who—who are you?" he asked.

"Well," the Kid smiled. "They call me the Paso Kid, for one reason and another. I'm a range detective—Cattleman's Association."

"Thank God!" Beadle said, wringing the Kid's hand. I've gone through hell! How in the world did you ever find me? I'd given up all hope!"

"Well," the Kid admitted ruefully. "I wasn't exactly looking for you, but one thing sort of led to another and made it look like you might be around somewhere. Then, when I saw a man ride in here with a couple of saddle bags full of grub, it seemed likely you were in here. Now, I'd like to hear your story so I know what we're up against—for sure."

Haltingly, the ranch owner told him what had happened. Three years ago, the Sandal ranch had begun losing money. He had written Jess Harlow for a detailed accounting and gotten a vague reply. The third year, the ranch improved considerably, but he had written Harlow and announced his intention to visit the valley. While waiting for a stage coach, after getting off the train, he had been approached by a man who claimed to have been working on the Sandal at the time he had written. This man said his life was in danger if he went on to Rico, but he would take him to the place where much Sandal stock had been slyly disposed of.

The man had brought him here. Since then, he had been held prisoner, beaten and tortured, in an effort to get him to sign over the ranch to Harlow. Roy Beadle had been afraid to do so, fearing that they would promptly kill him when that was done.

"And they would have!" the Kid agreed. "Tell me, did the man who brought you here talk like this—'Ah, sir! Believe me—truth is a thing that is nearest and dearest my heart'—"

"Great heavens!" interrupted the Easterner, his jaw loose. "That's the man! A perfect imitation—"

"Ah, sir, came a chiding, mocking voice from behind them. "Not perfect! Perfection, sir, is a thing we approach, but do not attain. Easy!" added the voice coldly, as the Paso Kid turned.

THE Kid smiled crookedly at the man who stood in the open doorway. It was the man who had posed as Roy Beadle at the campfire and offered him a thousand dollars to investigate the trouble in the valley.

"Hello, Preacher Bill," he greeted him.

The other man's eyebrows raised in astonishment and then he chuckled delightedly.

"Ah, you know me then!"

"I knew you that night," the Kid said. "The night you set a trap for me—with a thousand dollars as bait."

"And you walked into it? Pray tell me why?"

"I was going your way," the Kid told him. "And I wanted to find out your game."

"And you did, sir, you did. Part of it at

least!"

"All of it," the Kid corrected. "You knew the Association was sending me here—probably through Harlow. Your idea was to get me to pose as Beadle and then kill me. Harlow knew who I was in the saloon but he continued the game."

"Go on," Preacher Bill urged. "You sound like you might know at that."

"Harlow made reservations at the hotel and then took me there to cancel them," continued the Kid. "The next morning, knowing the sheriff was down on the flats, he took me down there, introduced me as Roy Beadle and warned me not to ride alone. All this was done with just one purpose—to set the stage for my murder and have the blame laid at the nester's door. Not only that, but it would confuse any investigation that would follow—either into my death or the disappearance of Roy Beadle."

"Amazing, sir!" mocked the outlaw.

"When the Association began getting reports from this valley, it looked a lot like you were alive, rather than dead, like most people thought," the Kid went on. "You probably took a trip East and laid low after your gang was smashed on the Border. I'd guess that Harlow is really Jess Woodward, your old lieutenant. He fell into the manager's job here, saw the possibilities, and sent for you."

"The Association is going to miss you!" jeered the outlaw.

"You bled the valley white," the Paso Kid went on, desperately stalling for time. "You had two of your men planted outside the pass posing as nesters. But even you couldn't force your men into honest farming, so you got a couple of Apache women to keep house for them and do the work. You and some of the gang hung out in this canyon when you weren't taking cattle over the line that Harlow was funneling in to you. You didn't care if war came between the nesters and the ranchers. You'd get the whole valley then."

"Very good, sir! Very good!" Preacher Bill exclaimed. "And now we come to the part you don't know—but can probably guess. Lanky Edwards bungled an important assignment. It's still simple, however and your death will still be attributed to the squatters. I'll have to take you to the appointed place. I'll have to take you alive, unfortunately, because we want you to bleed in the proper spot. Sheriff Bradshaw is so painstaking in his investigations. Now, don't let this startle you, I pray. I'm merely signaling Jess Woodward to come and take charge of Mr. Beadle!"

The outlaw backed out the doorway and fired a shot into the wall behind the kid's head.

Roy Beadle had sat in open mouthed silence as the Paso Kid had outlined the murderous scheme. With the shot, something in the tortured man's mind gave way. He screamed and got to his feet. When Preacher Bill stepped back inside the door, Beadle walked toward him, a babble of words coming from his lips, his hands pleadingly outstretched.

The outlaw shifted the muzzle of his gun to cover the Easterner and then hesitated. Instead of shooting him down, he brought the barrel down on Beadle's head.

In that instant, the Paso Kid's hands flickered down to his Colts. The outlaw fired. The slug drew a red line along the kid's cheek. At the same time, the Kid thumbed two shots. The slugs tore up through the outlaw's chest and throat. Blood spouted. Preacher Bill's knees sagged.

The Kid leaped over his body to the door, guns in hands. There was no one outside, but a rattle of gunfire came from the mouth of the canyon. There was a single heavy report blending in with the others, then silence. Seconds later, a band of horsemen raced through the mouth and toward the cabin. The Kid leaped backward, hooking out a toe to kick the door shut, then stopped. He slid the Colts back into their holsters, raised his hands and stepped into view. A dozen gunbarrels flashed in the sunlight as they were brought to bear on him. The Paso Kid grinned.

Sheriff Bradshaw climbed warily down from his saddle while a dozen nesters kept the muzzles of rifles and shotguns on the Kid. The lawman came forward cautiously and peered into the cabin. Roy Beadle gave a cry of relief and fairly leaped into the sheriff's arms. The Sheriff evaded him, stooped briefly over Preacher Bill's bullet-torn body, then came out scratching his head.

"I'll be damned," he said quietly, and looked at the Paso Kid.

"How'd you happen to land here?" the Kid asked.

"Damned if I know!" exploded the Sheriff. "Miss June comes a riding in to get me with this bunch here and tells me some cockeyed story I never did get straight. I come along with them anyway and then Jess Harlow opens up on us as we come in the pass. Why, I don't know!"

June came out of the group of nesters, her eyes shining proudly. "I knocked him outa the rocks with this," she said, patting the stock of the Sharps.

"I heard it," the Kid said solemnly. "And I believe it."

"After you left, Dad got to raving something fierce," the girl continued. "A lot of stuff about cattle going through a pass—something Uncle Jim had told him. This is the only pass I could think of so I rounded up some folks and high-tailed it to the Sheriff."

The Paso Kid told them the story, then, from the beginning, while the homesteaders listened in open mouthed wonder.

"What's going to happen to we'uns, now?" one of them wanted to know when the Kid had finished.

The Kid shrugged. "There's plenty of room in the valley for everybody providing they stay honest," he added. "Once the other ranchers know the facts, I can't see why there'll be anymore trouble."

Beadle tugged at the Kid's arm, glancing apprehensively at the nesters. "Mr. Kid," he said. "I could never thank you for what you've done. I'm going to give you a half interest in the Sandal, whether or not you like it. And I'm offering you a thousand dollars cash if you'll escort me out of this valley!"

The Paso Kid saw June Berry's shining eyes as she waited for his answer. A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"It's a fair offer, isn't it?" Mr. Beadle questioned.

"It's a fair offer," the Kid admitted gravely, and he smiled at the girl. "And it has certain advantages."

Throw the High, Hard One

By BURGESS LEONARD

is just about the best baseball story you have ever read . . . It is the strange saga of Ace Allen, king pin of the Hawk's hurling staff; a tough, vengeful nine-inning outlaw who rated the tag—"rottenest pitcher to ever toe big league rubber." And the big question that was running through the dugouts and over the stands was: "Is he a southpaw angel crooning Series Salvation . . . or a Diamond Devil dirging the Hawks to Doom?"

Watch for it in the Spring issue of

BASEBALL STORIES

along with a brace of scintillating fiction and fact yarns about the great American game.

ON SALE NOW

"Coffin 13 Is My Brand"

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Red-headed Tuss Flathers boasted a backtrail of six-gun mystery . . . handy experience to have at your hips when repping for a hoodoo iron like the Coffin 13.

THE VAST GATHERING of men and cattle at Encinal Bend on the lower Nueces brought a carnival spirit to the night, but Tuss Flathers drew aloof from the hell-bent revelry of fellow riders. The feeling that trouble was due to break was all around him.

Tonight under the dollar-round April moon, ranchmen and cowhands and cattle buyers mingled like a circus crowd, sharing whiskey jugs and barbequed calf ribs, swapping range gossip and playing high-stakes poker on blankets spread out beside leaping fires.

But tomorrow . . . tomorrow would be something else again, at least for Tuss Flathers and the little Coffin 13 outfit he was repping for at this beef settlement. He sensed trouble in the making, trouble that would break tomorrow morning when the commission buyers from Corpus Christi and San Antone started bidding

for the longhorns massed on the open bedground across the river. Every steer in that herd which bore a Coffin 13 brand was a potential spark to explode the dynamite keg Tuss Flathers was sitting on.

Flathers picketed his chestnut stud in a patch of grama grass where the twin knolls dipped to form a saddle overlooking the wagons and campfires and makeshift corrals of the Encinal Bend cattle-gather.

Steeped in a brooding and depressive mood, the young Texan returned to the motte of post-oaks on the south hump, to spread his soogans well away from the roistering throng at the foot of the slope.

It was a mellow night, the air perfumed with agarita blossoms, and an Argentine moonlight that could turn a man's thoughts to some favorite girl in his life. But the romance of it was lost on Tuss Flathers as he shucked his star boots and gun belt, rolling a cigarette to kill a few minutes while he shaped up his thoughts and tried to figure out what was behind the ominous set-up he had discovered here at Encinal Bend earlier in the day.

Across the river there were more than fifteen thousand prime longhorns massed on the holding ground.

Punchers from twenty-odd spreads up and down the Nueces had spent weeks popping those wily ladino steers out of Texas thickets. As a result the herd bore a conglomeration of brands that represented every iron in the brand books of half a dozen counties.

All spring, beef round-ups had been going on—or "cow hunts" as the Texas idiom had it. Buyers from the packeries at the Gulf ports and agents for steamship lines which trafficked in Texas beef for the Cuban market had been bidding in cattle, regardless of brands, at each of these gathers.

Here in the unfenced brasada, cattle drifted wherever graze and water took them, frequently wandering a hundred miles from home range. In keeping with the custom of the day and the country, outfits would bunch any and all cattle found grazing on its range, sell them for what the market would fetch, and keep a record of alien irons in their tally books so that the proper owners could cash in on any

sales of strays which bore their registered brand.

IT WAS a loose way of doing business, depending on the vigilance of county clerks in recording sales, and the honesty of the individual sellers, but it was Texas. At intervals, vast "cattle settlements" such as this one on the Nueces were held. Cattlemen would bring saddlebags laden with gold specie, the proceeds of recent sales, to divvy up with other ranchers whose cattle they had sold. County clerks would be on hand to record such transactions and keep everything legal and above board.

Tuss Flathers pinched out his quirly as he heard hoofbeats approaching. Impatience needled him, for he had no desire to make small talk tonight.

A voice he recognized as old Hector Dutton's called out:

"You picketed up here, Flathers?"

Dutton, an aged ex-Ranger, owned the Broken Circle outfit which bordered the Coffin 13 in Pedregosa County.

"Over here, Heck." Flathers' response held a flat, metallic challenge as he returned Dutton's hail, for he knew that the old Texan regarded him with an animosity which, at times, slopped over into open hatred.

Dutton rode up and dismounted, a formless shadow ground-tying his horse a short distance from Flathers' bedroll.

"I seen you checkin' brands with the tallymaster this afternoon," Dutton remarked without preliminaries.. "You should be taking a sizeable pile o' dinero back to Miss Cozy. A pity old Alamo couldn't have lived to see it."

Flathers made no reply as Dutton hunkered down on his boot heels a few feet away and crammed tobacco in a corncob. A match flared, revealing the ex-Ranger's seamy, brindle-whiskered face, one ear missing as a result of a scrape with a Mexican cuchillo back in the days when Dutton had packed a star.

The oldster's reference to Cosinda Lantell, owner of th Coffin 13, carried Flathers' thoughts back to what his girl boss had told him a week ago, when he had saddled up for the sixty-mile ride to this cattle settlement on the Nueces.

"We should have three-four hundred strays accounted for in this beef tally, Tuss. Maybe that many again will be in the pool herd. Sell for what you can get, Tuss. I trust your good judgement, you know that."

Yes, Cozy trusted him, though his past was a dark secret no man could be sure about.

He had been working on the Coffin 13 since before Cozy's hard-bitten sire, Major Alamo Lantell, had died and left his fourteen-year-old tomboy daughter the sole owner of his little ten-section spread.

Dutton had been Alamo Lantell's closest friend. Alamo was a veteran of San Jacinto, who had received his range as a gift from the Texas Republic when the citizen soldiers who had helped found the republic were being paid off in land.

The old soldier had cheated death on many battlefields: at Santa Fe under Kearney and at Chihuahua as a field officer under the famous Colonel Doniphan and later at the bloody campaigns in Monterrey and Saltillo and Buena Vista. And with the grim humor which had been part of the man, Alamo Lantell had chosen "Coffin 13" as his brand, to commemorate the thirteen battle scars on his tough old hide.

It was a hoodoo iron. Superstitious Mexican vaqueros refused to work for Lantell, claiming the rancho was haunted by the ghosts of the Mexicans Lantell had slain in battle.

But Tuss Flathers, drifting into Pedregosa County with his past a closed book, had been glad to work for old Alamo at twenty a month and found. And he had seen no reason for refusing the promotion when Miss Cozy offered him the foreman's job six years ago, the same day old Alamo had been gored to death by a bull.

Tonight, though, Flathers wondered if the old Mexican curse wasn't working on the destinies of Coffin 13. Dutton was here tonight because he had a burr under his saddle, Flathers knew that. And because he knew the old ex-Ranger might be a long time getting things off his chest, Flathers decided to share the foreboding which had been building up in him throughout the day.

"I counted over two thousand head of Coffin 13 critters in that pool herd across the river today," he said bluntly. "You

know damn well it's impossible that Lantell cows could have produced that heavy an increase since last fall's gather."

Dutton puffed thoughtfully at his pipe, his eyes appraising the young rep in the darkness.

"We branded less than two hundred calves this spring," Tuss went on. "I figger twice that many strays, at the very outside, could have had the Coffin 13 iron slapped on their hides by other ranchers who found dogies following Coffin 13 she-stuff."

Dutton cleared his throat, gesturing vaguely toward the campground with his pipestem.

"Tomorrow," the old man said thoughtfully, "buyers will be biddin' on that couple-thousand head of Coffin 13 stuff, son. As rep for the Lantell iron, it'll be your responsibility to accept or reject them bids, collect the cash and take it back to Miss Cozy."

Flathers caught the rising hostility and suspicion which edged his neighbor's voice, and, as always, he was at a loss to account for it.

"Some other rancher has been slapping the Coffin 13 iron on maverick stuff," Dutton went on to voice Flather's own conclusions. "Tomorrow that rancher is going to step forward to claim Coffin 13 dinero as his own. That's what I come up here to palaver with you about tonight, Flathers."

The rep laughed harshly in the darkness.

"Don't I know it?" he muttered, the cigarette hanging cold between his lips. "Some shady hombre is running a slow-brand deal on Cozy, the way I size it up. Somebody who knows the Coffin 13 ain't big enough to fight back. Somebody who has registered the same brand in another county is li'ble to claim every Coffin 13 critter who's been sold this spring, as well as that couple-thousand head in the pool herd. I don't like it, Heck."

Dutton got to his feet, grunting with the pain of an old bullet lodged in his left thigh.

"Miss Cozy is dependin' on you to bring back the dinero that's comin' to her, Flathers," Dutton said flatly, knocking the dottle from his pipe against a boot heel. "It's no secret between you and me I never cottoned to Miss Cozy puttin' you in the segundo's job."

Flathers curbed a mounting desire to cuss out the old man for a damned meddler, tell him to rattle his hocks down the hill and keep his jaw out of a game that had nothing to do with him.

"There's always the chance," Dutton said, "that you will collect the gold for three thousand head of Coffin 13 steers tomorrow. If so, you might get the idea that it would be easy to make off with that dinero, Flathers. I'm takin' it on myself to make sure you ride back to the Coffin 13 tomorrow. You can take that warnin' for what it's worth, but that's how she stands."

Flathers heard the old man slap the gun at his hip. Anger seethed through him, but he held his tongue, making no comment as the ex-Ranger hobbled back to his horse and rode off down the hill.

Flathers drifted off to sleep with Dutton's ultimatum still rankling. Cozy expected him to return home with payment for a maximum of six or eight hundred steers. She wouldn't expect payment for another two-thousand or so head of longhorns which for some unaccountable reason bore her father's brand.

But would the unknown rancher who was responsible for that fantastic increase stand by tomorrow, and let Flathers collect payment for even the six hundred head he estimated were rightfully his to sell?

That was the rub. That was the set-up that hinted of gun-smoke trouble tomorrow if he defended the rights of Cozy Lantell's hoodoo rancho.

II

DAWN found Tuss Flathers in saddle. The slanting red light revealed him as a leather-brown man of around thirty, wearing the flatcrown beaver Stetson, butternut shirt and brush-scuffed bullhide batwings of his kind. His hair was thick and tawny as a sorrel's mane and his eyes were like chipped amber, reflecting the worry which goaded him.

A single gun hung at his hip, a cedar-butted Walker.44. He packed a carbine in his saddle scabbard, and the shells which filled the loops of the belt girdling

his midriff fitted the chambers of both rifle and sidearm.

He found upwards to couple of hundred ranch owners, brush hands and cattle buyers massed down on the flats, breakfasting in communal fashion around chuck wagons which the larger outfits had parked tongue-to-tailgate around a handy spring.

Tired and dusty herd riders were coming back across the shallow Nueces from their graveyard shift with the bunched herd. Commission men were on hand with their saddlebags crammed with gold specie. Reps from every outfit in the brasada were gathered here.

Flathers joined the boisterous queue at the coffee barrel, searching the crowd for men he might know from Pedregosa County.

Dominating the crowd was Luke Warfel, the wealthy cattle-king who owned or had under lease the bigger part of Pedregosa County. A bulky-shouldered, swaggering range baron with squinted yellow eyes and a cleft jaw blue with close-shaven whiskers, wearing a long-tailed black coat and high-polished cavalry boots.

Flathers exchanged nods with Sedge Hoskins of the S Bar H outfit which flanked the Lantell place. Old Hector Dutton met his eyes without visible recognition.

The bulk of the throng were total strangers to Flathers.

Breakfast over, ranchers and cowpunchers began their exodus in the direction of an open-hooded Conestoga wagon which would be used as a platform for the buyers and cattlemen who would read off the season's accounts from their tally books.

From this same wagonbox platform would be conducted the spirited bidding for the cattle in the pool herd across the Nueces.

They had appointed old Sedge Hoskins to announce the sales, and other ranchmen stood handy with their specie belts.

"Sixty-three cows branded Hashknife F, average sales price twelve bucks a head!" Hoskins' stentorian voice boomed out. "Sold April second at auction in Cotulla."

A sandy-haired cowboy bowlegged his way to the wagon, raising his voice through the hubbub:

"Hashknife F belongs to Silas Fettibender over in Atascosa County, sir. I'm his authorized rep to collect the proceeds due."

Gold traded hands swiftly to complete the payoff. County clerks scribbled figures in their official ledgers. Haskins' thunderous voice carried on the business of the hour:

"Total of three hundred sixty-two cows branded Pothook Slash, sold to an Indianola packer last week, fourteen bucks."

Tuss Flathers saw Luke Warfel elbow past him.

"Pothook Slash was sold to me for taxes last fall," the Pedregosa County cattle boss boomed. He owned a dozen-odd lesser brands in addition to his giant Lazy W outfit, Tuss Flathers reflected bitterly, as a result of freezing out smaller outfits during the post-war years. Warfel was not a Texan; he was a carry-over from the reconstructionist regime, a Yankee carpetbagger who had waxed fat on Texas land and cattle.

"Two hundred eighteen cows branded Broken Circle, brought twelve-fifty a head, subject to deduction of one dollar a head to the Flying J for the bother of popping them out of the brush," Sedge Hoskins went on. "That'll be your cash, Dutton."

Heck Dutton brushed past Flathers and returned a few moments later with a coffee sack bulging with gold specie, to take his place a short distance to Flathers' left.:

"Tailing me like he thinks he's a Ranger after a rustler," Flathers grunted to himself. "I'll likely have the old son in my hair until he sees me get Cozy's receipt for her money."

Flathers felt a growing tension as sales were reported and paid for without challenge. A growing impatience spread through the crowd, waiting for the cattle settlement to be cleaned up so as to open the excitement of the morning's bidding on the beef held in the pool herd across the river.

THE sun was two hours high before Hoskins worked his way down the dwindling list of the consolidated tally-sheet to announce Coffin 13 for the first time.

"Seven hundred eight-one Coffin 13 cows, fetched an average of thirteen-fifty

a head less round-up charges to the Lazy W," Hoskins bellowed, swigging at the spout of a water bag to clear his throat. "Hmmm . . . my neighbor Cozy Lantell must have some prime bulls in her herd to produce that big an increase this spring."

Flathers paused a moment, heart-tom-tomming in his ears.

Hector Dutton edged closer to him, his whisper a taunt:

"No other claimant, Flathers. So that's how the wind blows . . . you hired independents to slap Miss Cozy's iron on mavericks so you could collect the whole kaboodle."

Ignoring Dutton, Flathers strode over to the wagon, lifting his arm above the sea of sombreros to attract Hoskins' eye.

"Coffin 13 belongs to Miss Cosinda Lantell, Pedregosa County." Flathers called out distinctly, giving the routine information for the benefit of the cashiers and tally clerks. "I'm repping for the Coffin 13."

A ripple of comment stirred the crowd, from buckaroos who had heard sinister rumors of the hoodoo spread on the upper Nueces. A pay clerk squatting on the endgate of the mudwagon was busy counting off stacks of shiny gold coin as Flathers moved that direction, holding his hat crown ready to receive the cash.

A hand touched his shoulder and a steely voice cut through the confusion:

"Just a second here, gentlemen. There's some mistake. Coffin 13 is one of my subsidiary spreads in Palo Loma County. I reckon that twenty-two thousand dollars comes to me."

The pay clerk paused in the act of pouring a golden cascade into the crown of Flathers' John B., as the Coffin 13 rep turned slowly. He found himself staring into the florid, handsome face of Luke Warfel.

"So," he greeted harshly. "You're the one who's running a sandy on my boss."

Flathers voice was grim.

"I figger we got in the neighborhood of nine thousand, six hundred bucks coming, Warfel, counting our rightful share of the pool herd."

Luke Warfel planted his thick fingers akimbo on his hips, meeting the cowboy's level stare with a patronizing air. The cattle baron exposed gold-capped teeth in a smile toward the county clerk up in the wagon.

"There seems to be a difference of opinion as to how payment should be divided in this case, gentlemen," Warfel said smugly. "In which case the dinero had better be garnisheed by the sheriff of this county, pending a review of the situation by Texas courts."

Flathers hitched his shoulders grimly, flexing his hands. Behind Warfel's glib proposal, he saw a diabolical shrewdness. Cozy Lantell was heavily in debt to the Stockman's Exchange Bank over in Pedregosa. The bank was owned by Luke Warfel. She was depending on the proceeds of this cattle settlement to meet her note and save the Coffin 13 from bankrutcy.

"This is a blue-nose Yankee scheme to freeze out another small-tally spread, men!" Flathers called out. "By God, it don't wash. I got dinero coming for Coffin 13 beef and I ain't going to see it tied up for months with legal red tape. By that time Warfel here will foreclose his mortgage on Lantell graze and add the Coffin 13 to his holdings."

Warfel swung back the tails of his fustian coat to reveal the curved staghorn stock of a Peacemaker .45

"You're a liar, Flathers. Coffin 13 is legally registered in my name over in Palo Loma County and damned if I—"

Warfel didn't see the punch coming. It started at Flathers' boostraps and connected on the cattle king's jaw with the flat, solid impact of a pole ax hitting a bull in a slaughter chute.

The Lazy W boss reeled back against the hub of a wagon wheel, blood leaking from his lips, raw murder kindling in his eyes. Above him in the wagon box, Sedge Hoskins started shouting for a sheriff.

"Flathers, damn you—I don't take that from any man—"

Warfel husked out the words, shaking his head to clear it.

"And no Texan cottons to be called a liar by no carpetbaggin' son who thinks his money makes him a tin god!" Flathers yelled back. "If it's shoot-out you want, make your play, damn it!"

It was wild talk, the berserk fury of a man goaded beyond control, and those in the line of fire began slogging back into the crowd.

Flathers' eyes were fixed on Warfel's gun butt, his own hand poised above the Walker at his belt. Then he felt iron hands close on his arms and draw him back, and he twisted his head around to see that Hendrick Vangessler, Warfel's three-hundred-pound Boer blacksmith, had seized him to block his draw.

Luke Warfel's hand slapped gun butt and brought his big .45 out of leather. Timed with the oily click of his gunhammer coming to full cock, another voice lashed out from the sidelines:

"Hold it, Warfel! You don't gang up on a neighbor of mine without getting a slug in the guts first."

Flathers felt Hendrick Vangessler release his arms. He saw Warfel lower his gun.

Old Heck Dutton held Warfel under the menace of a sidehammer .36, its bore trained on the cattle king's belly. Stamped across the ex-Ranger's grizzled face was a lethal readiness to blast Warfel into hell.

"You win, Dutton," panted the Lazy W boss, pouching his weapon. "I shouldn't have stooped to playing Flather's barroom tactics in the first place. I apologize for this scene, gents."

A big man wearing a sheriff's badge moved between them, gesturing to Dutton to put away his gun. The lawman's gaze shuttled between Warfel and Tuss then glanced up inquiringly at Sedge Hoskins in search of explanation.

"Luke," Hoskins said gravely, "I can see a sandy when it's rubbed in my nose. You're fixing to put a lien on Cozy Lantell's money so your bloodsucking bank in Pedregosa can foreclose on Coffin 13. I don't think us Texicans are going to like the smell of a deal like that when the truth gets out."

Flathers relaxed. Hoskins' opinion might carry enough weight to balk Warfel's high-handed trickery.

Warfel stared around at the hostile faces rimming him in.

He saw the raw hatred which Texas men held for carpetbaggers, knew it was time to draw in his horns.

"*'Sta bueno,*" he grunted, the border idiom sounding strange in the Yankee nasal twang. "Pay off Flathers what he thinks he's got coming. I reckon I can afford to let this steal ride."

His anger still unmollified, Tuss Flathers turned to the ashen-faced paymaster.

"Make it ninety-five hundred,' he said. "Warfel can take the entire amount of the pool herd sale."

When the money was safe in his hat, Flathers glanced around to see if Heck Dutton was anywhere about, but the old man had vanished. Flathers pushed his way out of the crowd to the remuda corral, roped his chestnut and transferred the specie to his saddle pouches.

He was hitting a high lope up the Nueces trail toward home when he saw a lone horseman spur out of the tepula growth bordering his route. Flathers' instinctive reach for his rifle eased off as he recognized the man as Heck Dutton.

"It's a lonesome ride back back," the Broken Circle boss said, not unkindly. "Care if you have company?"

"Why not?" Flathers grunted.

Whether Dutton was riding in the role of a guard to make sure Flathers didn't light a shuck with Cozy Lantell's money, or whether the old ex-Ranger had had a real change of heart toward him, Flathers could not guess. In his present mood he didn't especially give a damn.

III

THEY rode in brooding silence throughout the morning, pushing their horses along the trail at a tireless lope which spared horseflesh and riders alike. It was a truce, nothing more, and each rode with his own thoughts, ignoring the other.

They crossed the Nueces at Commanche Ford, eastern boundary of Pedregosa County, at three o'clock that afternoon and reined up in the sparse shade of a cottonwood motte to rest their mounts and rustle up a snack of bait.

Dutton gathered leaves and dry cowchips to get a fire going. By the time the coffee pot came to a boil Flathers had a mess of frijoles and sowbelly ready.

"Heck, you've always treated me like you figgered I didn't tote level," Flathers said abruptly, when the meal was finished and they were washing their tin dishes at the river's edge. "You mind coming out in the open for once and telling me why?"

Dutton packed his corncob and lighted

it from a coal at the smouldering campfire.

"A fair question, son," he responded finally. "You came to the Coffin 13 as a saddle bum. You never gave out any information about your back trail. You handled a hogleg like a man who used it for something besides hammering steeples in a fence post. You kept away from town like you was dodging somebody."

Flathers shrugged.

"So what? My work satisfied old Alamo. Where I come from or where I got my gun-savvy had nothing to do with the way I tied my dallies or run a brandin' iron. Is it that you're jealous because Cozy made me her ramrod instead of sellin' out the Coffin 13 to you like you wanted her to do when Alamo died?"

The ex-ranger flushed under the jibe.

"You know better, son. I love Miss Cozy like she was my own flesh and blood. I was with her the night she come into the world, when her mother died givin' her birth. . . When I seen all them Coffin 13 steers at Encinal Bend yesterday, I made the mistake of assuming you had hired them strays branded by independents, fixing to make a big clean-up and skip the country with Miss Cozy's money. I see now where I was dead wrong in my judgement, son."

Flathers grinned crookedly.

"So that's why you backed my play when Luke Warfel showed his hand this morning," he mused thoughtfully. "For a minute there I thought I'd have to punch Warfel's ticket."

Dutton peered at the young rep through clouding pipe smoke.

"Would it be the first man you ever killed, Flathers?"

The cowboy met his neighbor's blue stare without blinking.

"It would. You can take that or leave it, Heck."

Dutton was silent for a long moment. Then he hobbled over to his horse and unbuckled his slicker. From the pocket of a brushpopper jumper tied up in the cantel roll he took out a folded sheet of cardboard, yellowed with age and dogeared as if from much handling.

"Take a gander at this blazer, Flathers," he said, coming back to the rep's side. "You'll see why I took it on myself to keep an eye on you all these years . . . for Cozy's sake."

Scowling, Flathers accepted the folded carboard. He knew what it would be before he opened it.

It was a sheriff's reward poster, bearing his own photograph with the name *Harry Tussrow* under it. Faded red letters across the top proclaimed: *WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE*—$2,000 *REWARD!*

The picture which stared up at Tuss Flathers had been taken a decade before, when he had been a swashbuckling young bronc-buster over on a Guadalupe horse ranch above El Paso. The years had hardened his features, bleached his flaming red hair to a sorrel hue, harshened the line of his mouth and sharpened his eyes.

Wanted for the murder of Ranger Captain Elrae Wolfstone at Presidio, Texas, the printed type below the picture explained. *Aged* 19. *Height* 6 *feet* 2. *Weight* 170. *Red hair, brown eyes.*

FLATHERS looked up to meet Dutton's quizzical gaze. For five years, duplicates of this reward notice had weathered on barn walls and postoffice bulletin boards and fence posts throughout New Mexico and West Texas. Flathers wondered how Hector Dutton had come by this one over here in the remote Neuces county—and ten years later.

"I served under Captain Wolfstone during my Ranger years," Dutton said. "I helped bury him the night he was ambushed in Presidio. I carried this blazer with me when I retired and went to raising cattle on the Broken Circle."

Flathers had said nothing up to now. When he did speak, his voice held a strange, modulated pathos.

"Did you show this to Alamo when I went to work for him eight years ago, Heck?"

Dutton shook his head in negation.

"Why didn't you if you thought I murdered Wolfstone?"

"Because I didn't think you had killed Wolstone," he said. "Wolfstone and I were in Presidio that night to dab our loop on a Yankee lawyer who was trafficking in opium and other contraband across the Rio Grande, while posing as a local attorney. A lawyer named Lemuel Westcott

III, who has since dropped out of sight."

Flathers digested this information in thoughtful silence.

"And I was in Presidio that night selling a heard of fuzztails to the Mexicans," he said. "I'd had a quarrel with Captain Wolfstone, I admit. He thought those mustangs were stolen. That's how come witnesses swore that it was my gun that dropped Wolfstone. With hangrope waiting for me, what could I do but go on the dodge, Heck? I changed my name and drifted over to the Nueces country and took a job on the Coffin 13."

Dutton moved over to the campfire and fanned coals into flame with the reward poster which he had taken from Flathers hands. He hunkered down, tearing the cardboard in two.

"I admit I've shared Wolfstone's opinions of you all these years," he confessed. "But a horse thief ain't in the same stripe with a killer. The way you bucked Luke Warfel this morning told me I had made a mistake in thinking you might cheat Miss Cozy."

Dutton ripped the bounty notice into quarters preparatory to burning the pieces. Flathers, exalted by a buoyancy of spirit he had not known since his 'teens, walked over to his horse and cinched his stock saddle on the stud.

He was in the act of tightening the latigo when Heck Dutton jerked sharply under the impact of the bullet. Flathers heard the old man's choked gasp, and when he whipped around it was in time to see Dutton collapsing in a limp huddle alongside the smoking campfire, his body covering the shredded reward poster.

Simultaneously, from the far side of the Nueces, came the ear-jarring report of a gunshot.

Blood spurted from a round blue hole drilled through Dutton's temple. The old man had been killed instantly by the bushwack slug. And, lifting his eyes to spot a tell-tale smudge of gun smoke rising from the tules on the far bank, Flanders knew the truth. The line of fire told its own story. Dutton had caught a bullet intended for Tuss Flathers . . .

From the east bank came a sharp salvo of gunfire. Rifle slugs bracketed Flathers and his horse, thudding into the low claybank above their campsite and twitching the leaves of the cottonwoods.

Vaulting into saddle, Flathers gigged the chestnut behind the screening trees, feeling the shock of a bullet smashing his high-horned saddle pommel as he put the motte between him and the drygulch crew.

He heard shouts across the river as he sent the chestnut skyrocketing up the west slope, catclaw and mesquite clawing at his body. He dragged the carbine from its boot under his left knee as he topped the hogback, but the chaparral cut off his view of the river below.

A game trail twisted along the ridge toward the bald crown of a bluff two hundred yards upstream. Flathers spurred in that direction, levering a cartridge into the breech of the carbine as he rode.

He dismounted on the far side of the bluff and slogged up to the skyline on foot, to fling himself belly down on the hard gumbo. He wriggled over to where a slab of lava gave him a spot to rest his gun barrel and observe the scene of the bushwhack trap.

Riders, six of them, were splashing their mounts across the Nueces ford. At this distance Flathers could not recognize individual riders, a fact which sent him to his horse to get the battered field glasses.

The six ambushers had dismounted and were gathered around Dutton's corpse by the time Flathers got back to the crown of the knob and focussed his glasses on them. He saw the Lazy W iron on the rumps of the saddle horses.

ONLY one of the riders did he know personally—barrel-chested Hendrick Vangessler, the blacksmith who had seized his arms at the showdown that morning.

Vangessler rolled Heck Dutton's corpse over on its back. The Lazy W blacksmith was picking up the four pieces of reward poster and was fitting them together on the ground.

A flash of sunlight on the lenses of his binoculars betrayed Flathers to the outlaws. He saw men leap into saddle, saw Vangessler haul a rifle from his saddle boot and open fire.

A bullet shed its smoking copper jacket on the lava slab inches from Flathers'

face as he laid the glasses aside and picked up his own rifle.

A cold, murderous fury held Flathers there on the skyline as he cuddled the walnut stock of the .44-40 against his cheek and notched his gunsights on Vangessler.

The mounted gunnies were shooting at him now, but their short guns were not equal to the range. The blacksmith's rifle was the thing he had to silence before Vangessler got his range.

Tuss Flathers squeezed off a shot.

Through the gunsmoke he saw Vangessler drop.

The other riders vanished into the brush. The ominous pound of hoofs up the trail warned Tuss.

He hit the saddle and spurred into the brasada before Warfel's riders topped the rise but he did not ride far. Texas brush was a natural haven for hunted things; a pursuing foe could be attacked at arm's length without suspecting danger, so thick with perpetual shadow were these thorny mogotes.

When, an hour later, Flathers ventured out for a look at Commanche Ford, he saw that the Lazy W ambushers had disappeared, taking the dead blacksmith with them. Heck Dutton's corpse was missing as well, along with his horse and the coffee bag full of gold coin which his saddlebags contained.

IV

THE SUN ROSE like a lake of fire next morning as Flathers was turning his hoofsore chestnut into the cavvy corral at the Coffin 13. He racked his saddle and shouldered the pouches which carried Cozy Lantell's beef money.

The loose specie made a clinking sound as he headed past the bunkhouse where he could hear the Coffin 13 crew at breakfast. The gruelling strain of his all-night ride from the scene of Dutton's ambush had laid deep blue pouches under Tuss Flathers' eyes, and his jaw bristled with a week's growth of beard. This was, he realized, his last homecoming to the Coffin 13.

A deepening sense of sadness gripped the rep for the hoodoo rancho as he approached the rambling ranch house.

He heard a girl's voice lifted in song and he knew that Cosinda was getting breakfast.

Hitching the gold-laden saddlebags on his lean shoulder, Flathers trailed his spurs across the tiled floor of the gallery and entered the front door.

He found Cosinda in the kitchen out back. She was not aware of his presence as she stoked the range with cordwood.

As always, Flathers felt a catch in his throat as he looked at this girl. She had a wealth of wheat-blonde hair and spark-blue eyes. Her body was slim and curvesome in a split buckskin riding skirt and a man's shirt. A colorful scarf was knotted at her throat. Her feet were encased in the tiniest Coffeyville cowboots Flathers had ever seen, and the spurs buckled to them were not for ornament. Cozy Lantell could handle a hot iron or rope a calf or pop the thickets for a mossyhorn with any man.

"I'm back, Cozy," he called from the doorway.

The girl spun about, startled. Her face lighted up and she crossed the kitchen as he slung his saddlebags wearily across a chair, then bent to take the kiss which she planted on his stubbled cheek.

Her affectionate overtures stirred Tuss, but he took them for what they were worth: the little-sister devotion of a girl who had been in pigtails when he first hit the Coffin 13.

"How much did we get, Tuss? What was the tally? And you shouldn't have ridden all night to get back, you scamp, you! I guess I could have waited another day to get my hands on that filthy lucre!"

The words tumbled over themselves in her girlish eagerness. She gave him an ecstatic bear-hug and then turned to unbuckle the pouch straps and spill a cascade of glittering yellow on the table.

"THERE'S ninety-five hundred there," he told her. "I can't give you an accurate tally. I ran into a little trouble."

She turned, struck by the grim note in his voice.

"Stay for breakfast and tell me all about it," she said. "What kind of trouble, Tuss? Surely no one would dispute a shoestring spread like the Coffin 13."

He accepted her invitation to breakfast and while they dallied over their coffee he told her of Luke Warfel's perfidy, the slow brand which the avaricious Yankee had registered over in Palo Loma county as a ruse to seize all Lantell strays.

He was leading up gradually to Dutton's murder—she had always called the old ranger "Uncle Heck"—when hoofbeats sounded at the back door and a moment later someone knocked imperatively.

"Before you answer that, Cozy," Tuss said sharply, "I got to ask you for my time. I—I won't be able to ramrod the Coffin 13 any longer."

The girl froze in the act of rising from her chair, her blue eyes widening as she stared across the table at him.

"You—you're joshing me, Tuss!" she accused him. "You couldn't possibly leave me to run this place alone."

The hammering at the door was louder. Tuss shook his head.

"I got to drift, Cozy. And it ain't because I'm afraid Luke Warfel will come gunning for me after what happened down at Encinal Bend. It's a long story—"

A harsh voice rasped out from the kitchen door:

"You up and around yet, Miss Lantell?"

"Coming—coming!" the girl cried out, recognizing the voice as that of Sheriff Hiram Rakestraw from Pedregosa. She rounded the table to grip Flathers' arm.

"What's wrong, Tuss?" she whispered tensely. "Are you in trouble of some kind? You know I wouldn't live . . . I couldn't run this spread without you."

He pushed back his chair, waving toward the door.

"Better go see what the sheriff wants, Cozy."

She crossed the room and opened the door. Hiram Rakestraw stood on the top step, his sheriff's star flashing from a suspender strap on the outside of his spotted calfhide vest.

Disregarding Cosinda Lantell, Rakestraw pushed into the kitchen. His eyes were riveted on Tuss Flathers, seated across the room.

"I *am* in luck," Rakestraw growled, relief flooding his hatchet face. He fished in a pocket of his vest and drew out a rumpled sheet of yellow paper. "Read this telegram from San Castro and you'll know why I'm here this morning Cozy."

The girl accepted the Overland Telegraph form from the sheriff's hand and unfolded it. Rakestraw moved on into the room, fingers coiling about the plow-handle grip of his thonged-down Colt as he approached Flathers.

"I got to arrest you for the murder of Hector Dutton, Tuss," Rakestraw said grimly. "And for the shooting of Luke Warfel's blacksmith, Hank Vangessler. I'll oblige you for your gun."

Flathers' tawny eyes dulled over as he laid his gun carefully on the table.

"Go ahead and read him that telegram, ma'am!" Rakestraw ordered, not taking his eyes off Tuss.

Flathers saw the girl's cheeks go paper-white as she looked up.

"It—it's signed by Luke Warfel," she whispered. "It says some of his riders were returning home from the cattle settlement yesterday when they saw you murder Uncle Heck over at Commanche Ford, Tuss. In your getaway you shot Vangessler and he's near dead now."

Sheriff Rakestraw nodded coldly. He reached in a pocket of his levis and took out a folded square of cardboard, which he flipped open and thrust under Flathers' nose.

It was a duplicate of the reward poster which Vangessler had found torn to pieces beside Dutton's dead body yesterday.

"I also got a telegram this morning from the sheriff over in Castro," Rakestraw explained, "advisin' me to check back through my files of reward posters for ten years back. I done that. You recognize this here Harry Tussrow, son?"

Flathers felt the weight of Cozy's eyes upon him as he nodded in affirmation to Rakestraw's query.

"Yeah. That—that's my real name, sheriff."

Rakestraw unlooped a pair of rusty handcuffs from his shell belt and reached out to fetter the cowpuncher's wrists.

"Since the shooting occurred inside o' Pedregosa County," Rakestraw said, "I'm holding you for trial, Tuss. I—I don't mind telling you this comes as a shock to me. I would never have ticketed you for a rannihan that had followed the Owlhoot."

Tearing his gaze away from the manacles notched about his wrists, Flath-

ers looked over to see tears welling from Cosinda Lantell's eyes. His mouth compressed grimly as he saw the hurt and disbelief which numbed the girl.

"Cozy, I'll admit to plugging that Dutch blacksmith of Werfel's yesterday," Tuss said huskily. "But I didn't kill old Dutton. And I'm not guilty of murdering Captain Wolfstone either, Sheriff."

The girl broke out of her daze as she followed the lawman and his prisoner outside. Before Tuss knew what was happening she was clinging to him, her head nestled against his chest. Sobs wracked her slim body.

"No matter—what they think you are—I love you, Tuss," she whispered brokenly. "I always have worshipped you . . . and this doesn't change it. Remember that always, Tuss."

Flathers heard Rakestraw clear his throat. He pushed the girl from him tenderly, his eyes lifting to meet the sheriff's glittering stare.

"I'm ready to ride, Sheriff," he said.

IT WAS oppressively hot in the Pedregosa courthouse. Tuss Flathers sat hunched forward in his chair, seated between Sheriff Rakestraw and a mousy cow-country lawyer the court had assigned him as defense counsel.

It was the third and last day of the trail, a week since his arrest. The jury had been out over an hour now, but Tuss did not deceive himself into thinking that the talesmen were debating his innocence or even the degree of his guilt. His case had been hopeless from the first. Beads of sweat dewed Flathers' upper lip. It was hard to realize that his life or death was in the balance today.

He saw the circuit judge leave his private chambers and walk out to the well, where he had a string of beer bottles cooling on a trot-line. From inside the jury room, he could hear the clink of glasses and subdued laughter as the twelve jurors enjoyed their recess from the stuffy courtroom.

Tuss smiled grimly.

Cosinda sat on the first row of spectators' seats, together with Dutton's foreman and several other cowhands from the Broken Circle.

A large block of seats was occupied by range hands from Warfel's Lazy W and smaller ranches.

It was common gossip in Pedregosa that Dutton's crew believed Flathers innocent of the murder of their boss. But the judge and jury had to consider the evidence. They had the sworn testimony of five of Luke Warfel's buckaroos who claimed to have witnessed Dutton's brutal murder.

They had been cutting across the brasada on their way home from the Encinal Bend cattle settlement, their testimony went, when they had overtaken Dutton and Flathers at the Commanche Ford crossing on the Nueces.

They had seen Flathers shoot Dutton at point-blank range. The motive? Dutton's sack of beef money. But before Flathers could loot Dutton's saddlebags, the Lazy W riders had opened fire.

Flathers, in making his getaway, had fired a wild shot across the river. His slug had caught Vangessler in the chest. Later, when they had picked up Dutton's corpse with the idea of taking it to the coroner in San Castro, they had discovered the reward poster that branded Tuss Flathers as the slayer of Captain Elrae Wolfstone of the Texas Rangers in Presidio, a decade previously.

It was significant, the prosecution kept harping that Tuss Flathers had not denied his identity, protesting only that he was innocent of Wolfstone's murder, railroaded into going on the dodge.

A stir went through the packed courtroom when the circuit magistrate returned to his bench. At the prosecutor's table, big Luke Warfel talked with the special prosecutor. The cattle baron was said to have a heavy wager on the outcome of Flathers' trial, betting at ten to one odds that the Coffin 13 segundo would be sentenced to hang.

Flathers stiffened as the door of the jury room opened and the twelve chap-clad jurymen filed into the box.

"You have reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

"We have, Yore Honor," intoned the jury foreman, a bartender at a local honkytonk. "By unanimous ballot we find the defendant guilty as charged, murder in the first degree . . ."

Flathers was vaguely aware of Sheriff Hiram Rakestraw leading him before the

bar of justice. Through the tail of his eye he caught sight of Cozy, her face strained and white as alabaster.

Then the judge was pronouncing sentence, the words hammering into Flathers' jaded consciousness like nails being pounded into his coffin:

"Having been found guilty of the murder of Hector Dutton by a jury of your peers, this court hereby sentences you to be hanged by the neck until dead . . . said execution to take place on the public gallows in Pedregosa at dawn tomorrow, May third . . . may Almighty God have mercy on your soul."

One of the deputies conducted Tuss through a side door and across the weed-grown plaza to the brick jail.

Through the iron-barred window of his cell he saw Cozy Lantell mount her calico peg pony and, without so much as a backward glance toward the jailhouse, head up the road which led to Coffin 13.

News of the trial's outcome spread on the grapevine and by dusk Pedregosa was jammed with visitors. Ponies and buckboards filled the hitch racks along the main street. The Lazy W had declared a holiday, drawing to town the bulk of Warfel's riders.

It was dark when Sheriff Rakestraw brought supper to Flathers' cell. The old lawman had spent the afternoon testing a new yellow rope on the gallows platform, stretching it with a bag of rocks.

Crowds continued to ride into town as darkness thickened. Tinpanny music, the thump of dancing boots, the tinkle of glasses and the raucous laughter of painted jezebels in the hurdy-gurdy houses wafted to Flathers' ears as he picked at his cold food, his appetite gone.

The clock in the courthouse tower boomed ten o'clock when he heard Rakestraw unlock the door leading from the front office to the cell block. By the glare of the latern slung over the lawman's arm, Tuss saw Cosinda Lantell.

"Miss Lantell has come to say good-bye, son," Rakestraw said with bluff sympathy, fishing a ring of keys from the pocket of his duck jumper and unlocking the cell. "I'll give you folks twenty minutes alone together. Reckon it's the least I can do."

Flathers saw the girl's flushed face tighten with emotion as the sheriff stepped aside to let her enter.

Cozy carried a pair of buckskin gauntlets in her hand. In the act of entering the iron-barred cage, the girl's slim right hand slipped into one of the fringed cuffs of a gauntlet and an instant later lanternlight glinted on the stubby barrel of a silver-plated derringer which she had concealed in the glove.

"Stand hitched, Sheriff," the girl panted, leveling the hideout gun. Her hand did not betray a slightest tremor. "I'm just desperate enough to pull this trigger if you force my hand—"

Rakestraw lowered his lantern to the floor. His face twitched as he raised his calloused hands to the level of his hatbrim, his rheumy eyes fixed on the bore of Cozy's derringer.

"Don't be a fool, girl!" he said huskily, without fear. "You'll gain nothing by aiding and abetting a jail break—"

Cozy reached out to lift the Sheriff's Colt from holster.

"When a girl loves a man like I love Tuss she doesn't care what the law will do to her," she whispered, passing the .45 over to Flathers. "Tuss, we've got to do something to hold the sheriff here. I've got your chestnut saddled and waiting outside."

Flathers grinned tautly, hefting the sheriff's gun as he moved past the girl.

"I hate to do this, Rakestraw," he said softly. "But there's no other way out. I'd be foolish not to grab this chance Cozy has given me. One day mebbe you'll know I'm innocent."

The Texas lawman made no effort to dodge the chopping blow which Flathers laid across his skull. Tuss caught the sheriff's sagging form, dragging him into the cell and stretching him across the cot.

Cozy locked the cell door when Flathers stepped outside. He took the keys from her as they headed out through the front office.

The plaza was deserted. No words passed between the two as they crossed to the fence, ducked under and entered the blackness of the chaparral.

Flathers' horse was hitched to a mesquite some fifty yards from the plaza fence. The cowboy tossed Rakestraw's jail keys into the weeds and turned to pull Cozy tight against him.

Their lips met hungrily. Then Flathers held the girl at arm's length, fixing the pale oval of her face in his memory.

"I hate to leave you to face the law alone, Cozy," he whispered. "Rakestraw will be mad as a tush hog when he comes to . . ."

She pulled herself away from him and fumbled in a pocket of her blouse for an envelope.

"This letter arrived from San Castro today, addressed to you, Tuss." She thrust the missive into his hand. "I read it. It's from Vangessler."

He pocketed the letter and swung into stirrups. Metal glinted in the starlight and he saw that the girl was pushing her mother's tiny derringer into his hand.

"Keep this for good luck," she whispered up to him. "My Dad carried it during the wars . . . he claimed it brought him luck. Your .44 and shell belt are in your saddlebag, Tuss. Along with some food and whiskey."

Flathers thrust the derringer into his chaps pockets and bent low in stirrups to kiss her cheek.

"Hasta la vista, Cozy," he whispered, picking up his reins.

V

THE MOON lifted thirty minutes later and found Tuss Flathers well back in the brasada, a series of brush-topped hogbacks between him and the remote twinkle of lights marking Pedregosa town.

He reined up to let the chestnut blow and took advantage of the delay to open the letter Cozy had given him.

Vangessler's bold scrawl, written in a shaky, faltering hand, was clearly legible in the moonglow:

Tuss Flathers:

They got me in the Catholic Mission here in San Castro and the sawbones says my sand is running out. A man gets to thinking when he knows he's dying and I realize this slug in my briskit is one Luke Warfel should have got.

They tell me Warfel is trying to pin Dutton's killing on you. It was my carbine that tallied old Heck.

If it ain't too late when you get this, take a pasear over to Castro and look me up, son. I was in Presidio the night Captain Wolfstone was bushwhacked. I want to tell you about the Yankee lawyer who done that killing. I didn't know you was involved in the Wolfstone deal until I run acrost that reward poster at Comanche Ford.

HENDRICK VANGESSLER

Flathers stuffed the message into a pocket. He roweld his stud into a furious gallup in the direction of San Castro.

He realized the dying blacksmith had written the letter four days ago.

Flathers crossed the Neuces at midnight and hammered across the moonlit brush without sparing the chestnut. The pale glow of the false dawn was staining the eastern horizon when he hit the outskirts of San Castro and veered southward toward the old Spanish mission.

He ground-hitched the exhausted saddler in the chaparral outside the mission's adobe walls. One wing of the tiled-roof mission was devoted to a hospital ward, he recalled. But at this early hour, locating Vangessler's room might be difficult.

He tarried to check the loads in his gun. Then he climbed the mission wall, crossed a vineyard and entered an arched doorway of the hospital wing.

A friar was on duty at a candle-lighted desk when Tuss Flathers entered, his chaps thick with trail dust, his face gaunt with the strain of his fast ride.

"Senor Vangessler?" the friar responded to his hoarse query. "*Si,* he still lives. The padre administered the last rites of the faith last night. Come—"

Guttering candlelight revealed the giant figure of the blacksmith on the white-sheeted cot inside a cubicle. Tuss Flathers saw Vangessler's eyelids flutter open, his mouth twisting in a feeble grin of recognition.

Tuss knelt by the pallet.

"I got your letter over in the Pedregosa jail, Hank," Flathers said gently. "I was due to swing for Dutton's murder this morning. . . I reckon the good Lord will forgive you for your sins for writing that letter, amigo."

The blacksmith regarded him synically.

"'*Sta nada,*" he whispered. "I don't want to skid down the chutes to hell before I square my account . . . with that Luke Warfel son. I've taken . . . the dirty end of the stick . . . for Warfel too damned often . . . not to want revenge now."

Crimson bubbles foamed from the corners of his heavy mouth as he talked.

"I cleared up . . . Dutton's killing , , , with the padre who took . . . my confession yesterday. "Afraid . . . you wouldn't get here . . . before I cashed in my chips. But this business . . . of the Ranger's murder . . . is something you'll have to clear up . . . on your own."

Flathers stirred nervously. Any instant might see Vangessler slide over the Divide, and as yet the man had told him nothing specific to justify the sacrifice which Cozy had made in his behalf last night.

"Over in . . . Luke Warfel's private office . . . at the Lazy W," the blacksmith went on, "find . . . horsehide trunk. In this here . . . trunk . . . Warfel keeps—"

Wind stirred the burlap curtains at the window, extinguishing the candle. And as if it took a gentle breeze to extinguish the feeble spark of life remaining to Hendrick Vangessler, the brawny blacksmith shuddered slightly and life fled from his massive frame.

Flathers pulled a sheet over the dead man's face and left the hospital by way of Vangessler's window, rather than face a gamut of questions from the friar.

FLATHERS avoided game trails and leveled wagon roads during the day which followed, knowing that Sheriff Rakestraw would have possemen combing the brakes in an attempt to cut his sign. He did not doubt but that the Pedregosa lawman had given orders to shoot him on sight.

He refilled his canteen at a deserted line camp cabin on the outskirts of Warfel's home ranch just before sundown, and finished up the remains of the food which Cozy had packed in the saddlebags.

Twice on his trek through the trackless thickets on his way toward Lazy W. headquarters that evening, he heard horsemen riding by.

The need for sleep and rest forced him to hole up a mile from the Lazy W ranch. He slept fitfully, his Remington .44-40 handy to his reach.

At dawn he pushed on to the crest of a claybank which overlooked the whitewashed barns and sprawling corrals of Luke Warfel's home ranch.

Using his field glasses, he sized up the ranch. The spread appeared to be deserted. More than likely Warfel's riders were popping the brush in search of him.

He waited out most of the day without seeing any sign of movement.

Cradling the .44-40 across the pommel, he headed down the poplar-bordered lane leading to Warfel's ranch house, eyes raking the landscape for signs of life.

He reined up before the Lazy W and booted his rifle.

He found the front door unlocked.

Palming his Walker .44, Flathers entered. The house was silent as a tomb, save for a remote rattle of dishware in the kitchen out back.

He poked his head into various rooms opening off the hall before locating the cattle baron's private office.

Flathers felt his blood pound as he caught sight of an old-fashioned horsehide trunk in one corner. It was a type of luggage foreign to Texas, something which fashionable Northern landgrabbers had brought with them during reconstruction days.

Look in Warfel's horsehide trunk, Hendrick Vangessler had said with his dying breath.

He found the massive brass clasp locked. To shoot it open would bring the kitchen help running to investigate.

Taking a skinning knife from its sheath at his belt, Tuss slashed through the tough horsehide lid of the trunk, cutting a two-foot square hole.

At first glance, the trunk appeared to be a repository of Luke Warfel's personal treasurers. A pair of duelling pistols in an antique plush-lined case of costly alligator hide. Crested silverware in muslin bags. A full-dress suit and a silk tophat, embalmed in mothballs.

Something which resembled a gilt picture frame was in Flathers' way and he jerked it out through the opening. Tuss saw that it was a law degree, issued by an Eastern university. Spelled in Old English lettering across the parchment was

the name of Lemuel Westcott III, class of '59.

A draft from behind brought Tuss spinning in a crouch, thumb on gunhammer.

"Burglary is one of your talents too, my friend?"

Luke Warfel was framed in the doorway. His Colt muzzle covered Flathers. Warfel's bushy hair was disheveled and his eyes were red-brimmed.

Tuss Flathers broke the paralysis which seized him, whipping up his gun for a shot, knowing that he could not hope to beat Warfel's drop.

Flame licked from the bore of Warfel's gun. Something sledged across Tuss Flathers' skull, dropping him face down on the floor. He had the distinct impression of Warfel reaching down to pry the unfired .44 from his lax fingers.

Warfel's soft laughter was the last thing Flathers' ears registered.

WHEN he pulled out of it Tuss found himself astride his own horse. The ruddy glare of sundown hit him in the eyes and the cool breeze of dusk fanned the blood-crusted hair over his left temple.

Blood from the bullet-groove had dried on his cheek and neck, feeling sticky as he stared groggily about him.

The outskirts of Pedregosa came into focus and he realized that he had been unconscious during the trek over from Warfel's Lazy W.

His arms were tied behind his back with pigging thongs, knotted so tightly that the circulation was cut off. He had no sensation in his hands. A lasso-rope had been knotted to his ankles, passing under the horse's barrel to hold him in the stirrups.

Flathers twisted his head to the left, following the loop of the hackmore which led from the headstall to the platter-shaped Brazos saddle horn of the horseman flanking his left stirrup.

Then he saw Luke Warfel, dressed in his fustian town coat and wearing the funeral black Stetson which set him apart as a man of affluence in the cow country.

A sardonic grin pulled at Warfel's stony features as he met Flathers' stare.

"We're headed back to the gallows your girl helped you skip night before last, Flathers!" Warfel told him.

Flathers shook his head to clear it. They were only a hundred yards from the rear of the courthouse now, approaching town at an angle which hid them from the eyes of the main street. Sunset was burning out behind the county gallows, throwing the sinister platform into black silhouette. The hangman's rope still dangled from the gallows beam.

"You're the blue-nose Yankee shyster who killed Wolfstone over in Presidio," Flathers said. "You quit your smuggling and pulled out of the Rio country after that shooting. Changed your name and used your rotten money to grab off Texas land."

Warfel shrugged.

"You will have little opportunity to prove that, son. I was foolish enough to keep my law diploma all these years out of misguided sentiment. I cannot guess how or where you suspected the truth. But my diploma, that picture of the class of '59—they are ashes now, Flathers. The sheriff will know only that I did not kill you when I could have done so. I brought you back to die legally, as any law-abiding citizen would have done."

They halted alongside the jailhouse. A lamp glowed in the window of Rakestraw's office up front.

Dismounting, Warfel untied the ropes which bound Tuss Flathers to the saddle. He stepped back, motioning his prisoner to climb down from stirrups.

A numbing sense of despair flooded Tuss as he rounded the corner of the jail and climbed the front steps, Warfel close at his heels.

Sheriff Rakestraw, his face rutted from the fatigue of two days in the saddle, looked up from his desk in surprise as he recognized Flathers and Warfel.

"Your p r i s o n e r, sheriff," Warfel grinned. "I dumped him out of saddle with a lucky shot when he was attempting to steal a fresh horse out of my remuda this afternoon."

Rakestraw got slowly to his feet. Taking a jacknife from his pocket, he stepped over to Tuss and cut the rawhide thongs which bound the cowboy's arms. Then he turned toward the puzzled cattleman.

"The sheriff from San Castro is in town, Warfel," Rakestraw said. "He

brought a signed confession from the padres at the Catholic Mission over in Castro."

Warfel's brows arched. The grin faded from his lips.

"It seems that Hendrick Vangessler admitted to bushwhacking Hank Dutton over on the Nueces," the Sheriff went on. "And he had quite a bit to say about the shooting of a ranger captain over in Presidio by a Yankee lawyer name of Lemuel Westcott."

As he spoke, Rakestraw's hand dropped to his gun butt. Before he could complete the draw, Warfel's right arm twitched and a derringer appeared in his fist from a concealed spring clip under his cuff.

"You talk too much, Rakestraw!" Warfel grated, backing toward the open door. "You leave me no alternative but to kill you . . . and Flathers in the bargain. I had not dreamed that my blacksmith would turn traitor after all the years we spent together.

"It may console you in your minute of life to know you have forced me into quitting the Lazy W and all my holdings in Texas, Sheriff," Warfel went on, cocking the hammer of his hideout gun. "For what it is worth to you, I congratulate you on that—"

Tuss Flathers never knew how his senses told him of the bulk in his chaps pocket. Seemingly without conscious volition, Tuss's rope-calloused hand slid down to the pocket, his fingers coiling about the tiny rosewood butt of the .41 derringer which Cozy Lantell had given him two nights before. A weapon which Warfel had not thought to look for.

Hiram Rakestraw was bracing himself for the expected impact of point-blank lead when Flathers lifted the derringer from his pocket.

The glint of lampshine on the muzzle drew Warfel's attention to Flathers, and he jerked his own derringer fast.

The little single-shot .41 cracked like a whip, its recoil unfelt in Flathers' numb, wooden grip. Such a gun was useless except for close-in fighting. But at a distance of five feet, the leaden ball it packed was enough to tear through a man.

Warfel rocked back as the slug caught him over the heart. The unfired piece in his own hand clattered to the floor. Then, his eyes still staring in shocked dismay at the smoking pistol in Flathers' hand, Warfel's knees unhinged and he toppled backwards.

"You talked to much, Warfel!" Flathers whispered.

Sheriff Hiram Rakestraw broke the shackles which chained his muscles then. He released his frozen grip on his own half-drawn Colt and turned slowly to face the Coffin 13 foreman.

"You're a free man, Tuss. I reckon you know that."

As he spoke, Rakestraw handed the cowboy a duplicate set of jail keys and jerked his head toward the cell block door.

"Miss Cozy gave herself up after you made your break," the Texas sheriff said. "I'll give you the pleasure of unlocking her cell out back. As a matter of fact, Miss Lantell is expecting you, Tuss."

STOPPING AT YOUR TOWN

BRINGING YOU YOUR AMERICAN HERITAGE

Runaway Gunman

By Ted Fox

Watching Jim Blake trying to throw down on ornery, trigger-swift Joe Keeler was a scene Mesa's townsfolk would never forget . . . why, even a twelve-year-old could stare down shaky Jim.

JIM BLAKE could see the town lights of Mesa winking in the distance. He rode tensely in the saddle, a tall, lank, sandy-haired boy of nineteen. Just a kid in faded levis and a white shirt; a gray Stetson on his head and a single Colt hanging limply at his slender hip.

A horse and rider loomed out of the night suddenly. A voice called softly, "Jim is that you? Is that you, boy?"

"Yeah, it's me," Jim answered quietly.

The rider spurred up and peered at Jim. A hand gripped his arm. "Glad to see you, boy. Glad you're back." Doc Hardy was a lean silver-haired oldster. "I heard you arrived at the Diamond B this morning. I figured you'd be coming into town tonight." There was relief in his voice.

Jim stirred uneasily. He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs. Just as it had pounded all the way in from the Diamond B. Just as it had first begun to pound over a month ago when Hardy's letter had caught up with him in Texas,

Jim hit the saddle at a gallop.

telling him that his father had been shot by a man named Keeler.

"How's your father, Jim?" Hardy fell in beside him and they walked their horses toward the lights of town.

"Not so good," Jim answered. He's only conscious about half the time."

Hardy swore softly.

"He's dyin'." Jim's hands gripped his reins fiercely. "Keeler done a good job when he shot him."

Doc hitched around in his saddle. "Let me tell you about Keller, Jim." His voice grew hard. "He came into Mesa right after you left, bought the Flying W and then started spreading out. He hired a bunch of gunslingers to back his play. He killed Jed Harcum and took over his ranch. He gun-whipped Ben Davies and drove him and his wife and kids out of the country. Then he tried to get the Diamond B's water holes. When your father objected, Keller shot him."

Hardy paused for breath. Then he continued, "Keeler's mean and he's cunning. He's fast as lightning with Colts. Nobody around here's good enough to stand up to him. I sent for you, because your father needs you, and because you're the only man I know of who can out-draw and outshoot Keeler. And someone'll have to outshoot him, by God, before he kills any more innocent people, before he takes over all the ranches around here, including the Diamond B."

Jim's breathing grew rapid and he felt the sweat break out in the palms of his hands, felt it trickle down over his face.

"We're counting on you, boy." Hardy's voice was confident. "Your father's counting on you; all the ranchers around here are counting on you."

Jim drew a deep breath. He didn't say anything.

He remembered his father's words: "Just remember all the things I taught you and you can't go wrong."

THEY were passing the first of the outlying buildings now, turning up the main street of Mesa, walking their horses slowly past saloons glowing with yellow light. Jim was aware of the sound of voices and the low strumming of a guitar, of the smell of baked adobe cooling in the night air, of dogs barking, of the stamp of horses' feet from the hitching-posts on either side.

They drew up before the Paradise Saloon. Three years hadn't changed it, hadn't changed the town either. Jim let his reins fall to the ground. He swung stiffly out of the saddle.

"You've got friends in there," Hardy whispered. "We'll back your play against Keeler. We'll take care of any of his gunslingers if they try to interfere."

Jim was breathing hard, as though he had been running. His mouth was sticky dry.

"Good luck, boy." Hardy's hand pressed his shoulder.

Jim mounted the saloon steps one at a time. His teeth were clenched. He could feel the sweat trickling down over his body, icy cold against his skin.

He pushed open the batwing doors and stepped into the saloon. For an instant he stood still, blinking in the sudden glare. Blinking at the scene that confronted him. At the empty bar and tables. At the crowd of men backed up against either wall.

In one swift glance Jim saw the scene was set for a gun-fight. One man stood with his back to the bar, in a half-crouch, his arms crooked over his six-guns. He had the glassy stare of a snake, the cruel thin lips of an Indian. He was dressed in gambler's black. From the description his father had given him Jim knew this was Joe Keeler.

For a moment Jim thought the stage was set for his gun-fight with Keeler. Then he saw two men closing in on the gambler. They were ranchers.

"That's Dawson and McClaren." Hardy's low voice came from beside Jim. "Keeler ran off some of their cattle last night. The damn fools! They haven't got a chance."

Jim didn't turn his head. He was watching Keeler. A crooked smile played at the corners of Keeler's mouth. He was watching both men as they closed in on him.

The three men went for their guns at the same instant. Shots shattered the stillness. A cloud of powersmoke fogged one half of the room. Jim peered through that smoke, saw Keeler half-turned to the right, triggering at one of the punchers. He ducked, came up swing around to trigger at the one on the left. His actions were

a blur of speed. His shots rolled out like one.

In the split part of a second it was all over. Keeler stood with his back to the bar again, a thin smile on his lips. The smoke around him lifted and eddied up toward the ceiling. Jim stared in disbelief at the two ranchers stretched out on the floor, face down.

A stunned hush had fallen over the room. Not a man moved.

Keeler spoke softly. "Any of you gents want to take up the argument from here?"

His gaze travelled coldly over the faces of the men backed against the wall, came to rest on Jim standing by the door.

"Go get him, boy." Hardy's voice was low, tense.

Jim felt the tremor run down his arms. Down through his body and into his legs. A few in that crowd had turned to stare at him. They recognized him. He saw the hope spring into their eyes. He remembered Hardy's words a few moments ago. "The whole town's counting on you. Your father's counting on you."

He felt sick to his stomach suddenly. Wave after wave of nausea passed up into his throat. He had thought he could do it. He had thought he could go through with it. He had thought so until he had seen Keller in action just now. Seen the flashing speed of Keeler's Colts. Looked into the cold flint of Keeler's eyes.

"Some other time." He spoke the three words hoarsely.

Blindly he turned to the doors. He pushed through them, stumbled across the porch and down the steps to his horse. He groped for the reins, climbed into the saddle. With a wrench he swung his pony around and drove in his spurs.

HE rode out of town at a dead run. He could picture the stunned surprise in Hardy's eyes. In the eyes of the ranchers who had recognized him. In his father's eyes when he heard of what had happened.

He drew a long shuddering breath and let his horse drop to a walk. He thought of his father. He thought of all the years his father had spent training him with a six-gun. Crippled when a horse had fallen on him, old Dan had tried to teach him the things he had never been able to do himself. In his son he had tried to build the sort of man he might have been.

But all the time Jim had hated it. Hated the very feel of a gun in his hand. Dreaded the day he might have to use a gun the way his father would expect him to.

His father had never known, or guessed the truth. And rather than have his father find out he had left Mesa and the Diamond B. He had drifted off to Texas, never intending to come back.

Jim heard the pound of hoofbeats behind him. Panic gripped him, then died as he made out the white hair of Doc Hardy gleaming in the moonlight.

Doc drew alongside and dropped to a walk. When he spoke his voice was low, strained. "I was going out to see your father in the morning, Jim, but guess now's as good a time as any."

He couldn't meet Hardy's glance.

"Time's running short, Jim." Hardy's voice was sharp. "You don't want to put it off too long."

Jim didn't anwer. They rode on in a silence now that wasn't broken until they came in sight of the Diamond B. They dismounted before the low-slung ranchhouse. Jim's legs were still shaking. He wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand.

His father was waiting in the bedroom. He lay motionless in the big four-poster bed, his arms stretched out lifelessly at his sides. Lee, the Chinese cook, hovered in the door.

Dan's face was gaunt, pale. His eyes were open, and there was a question in them.

Jim stood beside the bed. He was aware of Hardy at his back.

"Well?" Dan whispered.

Jim ran his tongue over dry lips. His mind strove frantically for words. They wouldn't come. Shame was a steel band around his throat, choking him.

"Well?" Dan repeated.

"It's all over," Jim answered hoarsely.

"Yuh got him?" Dan's voice gained in strength.

Jim nodded.

His father stared up at him, a slow smile spreading across his taut white face. "I knew yuh would. I knew yuh would." There was deep satisfaction and pride in the old man's whisper. His eyes closed.

Jim stared down at the pale, tired face on the white pillow. He felt like a drowning man. The more he struggled, the deeper he sank. He had lied to his father. But at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that his father would never live to learn the truth. That he wouldn't be hurt that way.

Hardy drew up a chair and sat down beside the bed. He felt Dan's pulse. He didn't look up. His jaw was set in rigid lines.

Jim stood silently by his chair. His father's breathing was labored, painful. But there was color in his cheeks now. The smile on his lips grew. Minutes passed. They became an hour and still the two men watched, and waited. Dan's breathing was growing more regular.

Hardy leaned back in his chair finally with a satisfied grunt. He didn't speak for a minute. Then he said. "Your father's going to live, Jim. Your telling him that was like a shot in the arm. It was what he needed to make him want to live."

JIM didn't answer. He turned and walked rapidly to his own room.

Quickly he began gathering up the few belongings he had unpacked only a short eight hours before. He folded them in his bedroll. When he was finished he looked down at the gun at his hip. With trembling hands he unbuckled it and flung it onto the bed.

"Going some place?"

Doc Hardy was standing in the doorway. Hardy's glance lifted from the packed bedroll to Jim's face. There was a tightness about Hardy's mouth.

"You can't leave now, Jim."

Jim's words jerked from his lips. "I couldn't face him again. I couldn't lie to him again."

Hardy came into the room. "What's the matter with you, boy?" He put the question bluntly. "You yellow?"

Jim's fingers curled into knots.

"By damn you are. But you're not going away. You're going back tonight and have it out with Keeler."

"You're crazy!" The two words burst from Jim's lips. "You're crazy," he shouted again. He bent and picked up his bedroll. "I'm getting out of here as fast as I can."

"You leave now and you'll be running for the rest of your life." Hardy warned.

"I've been running all my life."

"Not like this."

"No," Jim gasped. "I can't. I can't, I tell you."

With a groan Jim started for the door. The thought of facing Keeler's guns filled him with terror. He pushed past Hardy. He crossed the living-room. He could see the light burning in his father's room. He caught a glimpse of the foot of his father's bed.

Then he was outside and tying the bedroll to his saddle. Doc Hardy had followed him. He stood on the porch steps, watching him silently.

Jim mounted. Without looking back he turned his horse away. He rode out of the yard at a walk, then spurred his horse into a run. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't care. It didn't matter just as long as it was away from Mesa, and Joe Keeler, and the shame that would come into his father's eyes when he learned the truth.

The lights of the Diamond B dropped away behind him. Then winked out.

IT WAS Saturday night and Casa Verde wasn't any different from other cowtown in Texas. From the street in front of Drago's saloon came the sound of hoofbeats as a bunch of waddies whirled to a stop. The batwings crashed open and a noisy crowd of punchers entered. They lined up at the bar, pushing and yelling for drinks.

Jim Blake sat at a table in the corner. In the month that had passed since he'd run away from Mesa he'd held two jobs. He'd quit them both. On one he'd been told to pack a gun. On the other they hadn't told him he had to. They'd laughed at him. Poked fun at him. It had been like rubbing salt in an open wound.

He looked down at his hand grasping the half-empty whiskey glass on the table in front of him. There was dirt under his finger-nails. His levis were torn and soiled. His shirt was dirty. His hat had sweat-grime streaking it above the band.

This was his first day on his new job. For a place to sleep, food, and whiskey, he worked for Drago, cleaning out the saloon, washing glasses, doing the chores.

He was drunk. He was drunk all the time now. He had found that the more whiskey he poured down his gullet the less he was able to remember the past.

A puncher knocked over his drink and Jim rose to clean it up. When he staggered, a man pushed him roughly away. Jim fell against the wall. The man looked at him expectantly. Jim shook his head to clear the haze from his eyes. Not that he would start anything. Hell no. He didn't have the guts to stand up to anyone any more. It didn't take a Joe Keeler. A twelve-year-old kid could stare him down.

That was what fear did to a man. It kept piling up inside of him until he was afraid of his own shadow.

When the fight across the room started Jim backed into the corner. He dreaded them. Two nights ago he had seen a man die and it had filled him with horror.

Now he was aware of the crowd around the card table scattering, of the hush that fell over the room, of the two burly men facing each other angrily. He shook his head fiercely to clear the haze.

It was the same familiar pattern. One man taunting the other to fight, to go for his gun, to shoot. Jim watched, fascinated. It was as though he were that second man. He felt the same symptoms of fright squeezing his heart, driving the breath from his lungs in short gasps.

"You palmed that ace from your sleeve, Devers."

The man who was doing the accusing spoke with the same icy confidence that had been in Keeler's voice that night. His name was Britt. He was one of Drago's dealers.

"That's a damn lie," Devers barked out. He was backing slowly away from Britt, falling into a crouch. His face had turned pale but there wasn't fear on it. Jim watched for the first sign to show. He watched eagerly. Almost hopefully. He didn't know why. He didn't know Devers. He didn't have anything against the man. He leaned forward tensely, completely sober now.

Devers hesitated. Britt waited, his hands hovering over his guns. Then Devers hands streaked down, snapped up, spitting flame. The sound of four guns roared out. A look of surprise flashed over Britt's face. For an instant he stood motionless. Then he plunged heavily to the floor and lay still.

A moment of silence followed, then someone coughed and the tension was relieved. Men stirred, moved back to their tables and to the bar. The conversation picked up again.

Devers reloaded his smoking guns. His face was pale, but there was a smile on his lips. Jim was filled with envy. God, how he wished he could have stood up to Keeler that way. Without cringing. Without fear.

Devers slipped his Colts back into their holsters. Someone slapped him on the back. A drink was held out to him. He pushed it aside. Stiff-legged he walked rapidly to the door and disappeared outside.

Jim sidled down the wall. In a minute Drago would be looking for him to help take Britt away. He quickened his pace at the thought. He came to the door, pushed through it. He stood on the porch a moment to get his breath. He was trembling. He needed a drink.

But he heard someone inside calling his name and he turned quickly along the porch and sprang down into the alley between the saloon and the building next door. It was black in there and he could hide until Drago himself and the bartender had carried Britt away.

He leaned against the saloon wall and shut his eyes. It was agony to go through each fight this way, as though it were his own. Tomorrow he would leave Casa Verde. He couldn't work in a saloon any more. He couldn't stand to be reminded of Keeler constantly.

AT a noise from the other end of the alley he opened his eyes. It was a coughing sound as though someone were choking. He stole quietly down the alley. He came to the rear of the building. There he stopped short.

There was a man down on his knees in the back yard. Jim could make out the dim shape in the moonlight. He was sick. Just some drunk. Jim turned away.

But the man heard and sprang to his feet with a curse. Moonlight glinted on a gun barrel. "Come out with your hands up," he snarled.

Jim obeyed quickly. He stood in front of the man with his arms stretching skyward. The man peered at him.

Cursing, he lowered his gun. "It's you," he said disgustedly. "I thought it was another of Drago's hands. Beat it," he snarled between gasps. "Get the hell away from here."

But Jim stood rooted to the spot. The sick man was Devers. He was sitting on the ground now, holding his head weakly in his two hands.

"How," Jim asked in awe, "did you shoot that straight when you was drunk?"

"Drunk?" Devers' head snapped up. "I had one drink all evening. I'm not sick from liquor."

He stopped and stared up at Jim intently. "Was you ever scairt?" he asked abruptly. "Was you ever so scairt your stomach tied itself into knots?"

Jim recoiled a step.

"Damn you,," Devers groaned. "If you ever breathe a word of this to anyone I'll—"

"I won't," Jim gasped. "But I don't see —you didn't look like you was afraid."

Devers laughed shortly. "You didn't look close enough, mister."

"And yet you went ahead and shot it out with Britt," Jim whispered.

"Hell yes," Devers growled. "Plenty of men are afraid to gun-fight but they do anyhow. They got to. They got to force themselves to it. Just being afraid don't make a coward. A coward's the gent who gives in, who gives up trying too soon."

Devers rose to his feet. "You open your mouth about what you seen—"

"I won't," Jim answered.

Devers stumbled toward the mouth of the alley, and vanished. Jim stared after him. He stood with his arms hanging limply at his sides, his fingers slack. He was stunned. He had never known any man other than himself to be afraid. And yet Devers had said there were plenty of them. Devers himself had been afraid. So filled with fear that it had made him sick.

Jim walked slowly back up the alley. He mounted the saloon steps, pushed through the doors and made his way down the wall to his table in the corner. He poured himself a drink. He held it in one hand, looking at it. He was hardly aware of the crowd milling around him, of the din of voices.

Dever's words were pounding through his head, drowning out all other sounds. "A coward's the gent who gives in—who gives up trying too soon."

Jim drew the whiskey glass to his lips. He stared at the brown liquid. "A coward's the gent who gives up trying too soon." Over and over the words repeated themselves in his brain. He set the glass down slowly, a tremor of excitement running through him.

Abruptly he rose to his feet. He turned away from the table and walked unsteadily to a door at the end of the bar. He stepped into a small storeroom. He lit a candle, then closed the door. This was where extra chairs and spittoons were stacked, where brooms were kept, where he slept, on a dirty mattress on the floor.

Jim stood before a small mirror nailed to the wall. He stared intently at the unshaven, bleary-eyed face reflected in the glass. He had sunk low. He hadn't known how low until just a few minutes ago. He turned away from the mirror.

He changed his soiled shirt. With hands that shook he scooped the two days' growth of whiskers from his face. He brushed his hat, polished his boots. He looked again in the mirror. It was an improvement, outwardly at least. What was inside of a man was what counted. He didn't know what was inside of him. Not yet.

That night he left Casa Verde. He had borrowed a horse from the livery-stable, a gun from Drago's barkeep. He rode across the cool desert, Devers' words constantly in his ears. He kept repeating them out loud.

Two days and two nights he pushed his horse hard, stopping only for food and drink, and a few hours of rest. He crossed the line into Arizona. He reached Mesa at noon of the third day.

He rode up the main street. His face was pale. His hands gripping the reins were shaking. It was just like the last time. He was afraid. Horribly afraid.

HIS horse stopped in front of the Paradise Saloon. Men on the porch stared. They didn't speak and he swung out of the saddle, clinging to the pommel a moment—until he could steady his legs, until he could regain his breath. Each movement, each step nearer, was an effort.

He mounted the steps slowly, Before

the batwing doors he paused again. Now, he thought, now was his last chance to turn and run. The men staring at him hadn't recognized him. No one would ever know.

He plunged through the doors, stopped short just inside. Half a dozen men stood at the bar. They turned and looked at him.

"Where's Keeler?" a voice Jim hardly recognized as his own rasped through the stillness.

The barkeep jerked his head to a door that led into a back room.

"Tell him to come out," Jim gasped. "Tell him Jim Blake's come back."

The bartender glided down the bar. He stepped quickly to the door, opened it and disappeared. The other men backed against the wall. A silence fell over the room.

Jim opened his mouth so he could breathe easier. Wave after wave of nausea passed up into his throat. He couldn't go through with it. He couldn't face Keeler's guns. He had thought he could.

Desperately he thought of Devers' pale face when he shot it out with Britt. Of what Devers had told him out back of the saloon.

But Devers' words were a confused jumble in his head now. His brain refused to function. His arms felt powerless, his fingers numb.

Keeler stepped into the room, smiling. He stopped. He was waiting.

"Just being afraid don't make a coward. A coward's the gent who gives in, who gives up trying too soon." Devers' words burst through the paralysis gripping Jim's mind. "Plenty of men are afraid to fight, but they do anyhow—they got to—they got to force themselves to it. They got to force—"

With a sobbing breath Jim went for his gun. His fingers clawed at the butt and shots sounded distantly. He was aware of black powdersmoke swirling up around him, blinding his eyes. He triggered his gun frenziedly.

It was several seconds before he realized the room was silent again; that the hammer of his gun was clicking on empty shells; that the powdersmoke thinning in front of his eyes revealed Keeler sprawled out on his face on the floor.

Jim stared at the trickle of blood running down out of Keeler's head. He looked down at his gun. A thin wisp of smoke curled up from the muzzle. He felt dazed.

Dimly he was aware of feet pounding up the plank walk outside, of the doors crashing open behind him, of men crowding into the room, of the excited buzz of voices that rose on every side.

Then the crowd parted and Doc Hardy stood before him. Hardy's glance jumped from Keeler to Jim's face and a slow smile parted his lips. He grasped Jim's arm.

"I knew you'd be back." There was admiration in Doc's voice. "I knew you could do it."

Jim's head lifted. He stared around at the crowd hemming him in. There was something unreal about the whole thing. An unfamiliar pattern. He had lived so long with fear.

"Your father pulled through, Jim—" Doc was speaking again—"though he was hard hit when you went away—when he learned—" Hardy stopped. His hand pressed Jim's arm. "Let's ride out to the Diamond B, boy. This'll make mighty mighty pleasant news for the old man."

Jim drew a long deep breath. He looked down at his hands. They were steady. Steadier than they had been for months.

"Let's go," he said exultantly.

A Fiction House Magazine

John R. Hughes--Texas Ranger

By Franklin Reynolds

For thirty years Ranger John R. Hughes patrolled the vast stretches of Texas, building up a rep as the most daring, resourceful, courageous peace officer in the long and turbulent history of the Lone Star State.

THE TEXAS RANGERS. There is magic in those words—such forceful charm that the mere expression of them has stayed the murderer's trigger finger; caused the robber to forget his bank plans; the rustler to let the cattle graze in peace, and other hombres to head for the nearest state line.

The Texas Rangers!! Chivalrous, bold, impetuous—and at the same time wary and calculating. They were destined to become famous as the nation's most picturesque, fearless, and efficient law enforcement officers, before being ingurgitated by the State Department of Public Safety in 1935, almost one hundred years to the day after their *debut* at San Felipe de Austin. There was adequate reason for their fame—they deserved it—but none ever expressed this reason more clearly or concisely than the frontier mother who wrote her sister back in Tennessee:

"We prayed to God to keep them red devils away from us and when that never done no good we sent for them thar Rangers."

For a hundred years they rode the mountains and the plains, the river bottoms and the pine woods in their big hats and their shop-made boots, their heavily-laden cartridge belts and inlaid spurs, and with their sixshooters and Bowie knives and Winchesters pushing the frontier—at once a line on the map and a lawless condition—on and on into the fires of the setting sun. A century of war—the white man's civilization against the red man's cunning savagery, the brown man's evil-minded cruelty and the white renegade's inhuman brutality. In these hundred years they drove the Indians from the plains, the caballeros across the Rio Bravo.

On June 3, 1947, a well preserved and active old gentleman of 92 years walked into the garage behind his home in Austin, Texas. He pulled a big white-handled six-shooter from the waistband of his trousers, pulled the hammer back, placed the muzzle at his temple and pulled the trigger. Texas was shocked when the news went abroad. John R. Hughes was dead. His health hadn't been good for a long time. Only a few weeks before he had visited the capitol and had been applauded by the Legislature. He had never married. He never smoked or gambled or drank. He had always been a gentleman, a church-going straight-shooting Ranger.

By the people of Texas—by the Rangers themselves—John R. Hughes had been selected by public acclaim in an informal Texas sort of way as the prototype of the typical Ranger. Better than any other man, he bridged the gap between the old-fashioned horseback Ranger of frontier simplicity and the modern, mechanized Texas peace officer.

The first blow John R. Hughes ever struck for law and order was purely a personal matter conceived in anger and born in a spirit of revenge. In 1884, Hughes, then in his early twenties, was a horse rancher living near Liberty Hill. The business of a horse rancher at that time was not necessarily one of breeding and training fine horses. Texas was just unfenced space. The business of horse-ranching was primarily one of running down and trapping the wild horses roaming the range —horses that weren't any man's property until he put his rope around their necks and his hot branding iron on their hides.

ONE morning Hughes arose to learn that during the night twenty of his best horses had been stolen. Later that day he learned his neighbors had lost almost a hundred more to the same thieves. He made these neighbors a proposition—if they would just look after his ranch while

he was gone he would go out alone and get back both horses and thieves!

His neighbors didn't see him again for almost 13 months but when he returned he had most of their horses. For more than a year, swapping tired horses for fresh ones and making discreet inquiries, he had followed the trail of the outlaws finally coming upon their camp in New Mexico. He cornered them one night single-handed and when they resisted he killed four of them and delivered the other two to the nearest sheriff.

The Adjutant General of Texas heard

of Hughes and wrote asking him to go to the Ranger camp at Georgetown.

"The General has asked me to try and enlist you as a Ranger," the camp commander said. "We've heard of your work against those horse thieves.'

"Well," said Hughes, "I reckon that as long as I'm doing the work I'd might as well get paid for it."

That day he assured the success of Zane Grey's first western novel, "The Lone Star Ranger" because he became the embodiment of the fictional character, *Buck Duane,* and was immediately recognized as such when the novel was first published in 1915, the year Hughes resigned from the Ranger Force to become a banker and ranchman.

His first official order after he had taken the oath of office was to ride 800 miles to his first post of duty at Camp Wood.

In time Hughes was detailed to duty in Rio Grande City and warned to watch out for a notorious Mexican badman who had already gun-shot a host of peace officers. No sooner had he established himself in his new post than he began talking with the Mexicans.

"They tell me there's a bad hombre hereabouts," Hughes would casually remark. "I wish I could look at him once, down the barrel of my gun. Well, maybe he'll come over sometime. Maybe I'll get a chance."

As Hughes described the situation afterward, "I found out that although I couldn't go to Mexico I could make Mexico come to me." In a short time word was carried to the *bandido* that in Rio Grande City there was a man who wanted to arrest him, a Ranger whose name was Hughes, a man who didn't swear, drink, gamble or run with the painted women—a Ranger who carried a white-handled pistol and who went to church every Sunday.

The scheme was effective. The badman visited Rio Grande City and promptly upon his arrival sent the Ranger word of his presence.

The Mexican took up a watch in front of a saloon. He didn't make any secret of the fact that he had come to town to kill Ranger Hughes.

Then the officer appeared on the street. Only the width of the street separated them. Hughes started across. The Mexican was a proud man and not entirely a fool. He was conscious of the stares of those friends to whom he had made his boasts, but his hand dropped harmlessly from the butt of his gun to his side. Spectators shuffled off for cover. Hughes' finger tips brushed the butt of the six-shooter on his hip but did not linger. The black eyes of the Ranger bored into those of the man from "across the River." Hughes walked on. Not more than ten feet separated them.

"I want you, hombre," the Ranger said.

"I go," replied the badman, the killer of a score of officers.

In Hughes' penetrating eyes the Mexican had seen a nameless something that was far more determined, far more omnious, far more dangerous than anything he had ever seen in the muzzle of any other man's gun.

Hughes disarmed the man and imprisoned him. His reputation as "Boss of the Rio" was made. A rancher who witnessed the arrest uttered words that have become immortal in the history of the Texas Rangers. "One Ranger is worth a hundred soldiers," he said.

JOHN R. HUGHES was never proud of his lethal skill with his sixshooters as a man of lesser character might have been. He used it as an accomplished surgeon uses his scalpel—as an essential instrument for bettering a condition. He realized the uselessness of resorting to kind words in a fruitless effort to reform a hardened criminal. He hated a thief. It was never his idea that punishment should be punishment and nothing more. He believed the punishment should fit the crime and the criminal, and in the case of a case-hardened, salty outlaw it should be of such proportions and magnitude as to serve as an outstanding example to all their kind.

That was why, after he killed the three thieves who resisted him on the property of the Fronteriza Mining Company at Shafter, he had them buried beside the trail they had followed from Mexico, and then placed tall white crosses above their graves—crosses that gleamed on the nights the moon was shining, and crosses

that suddenly loomed out of the darkness on nights that were black. Crosses that stood long after the last thief had travelled that trail.

By the boundary treaty between the United States and Mexico it had been determined that the line should be the bed of the Rio Grande as the river then flowed. Sometime between the making of the treaty and the Civil War the Rio changed its course and cut a new channel to the south. As a consequence it left on the north side an irregular piece of land about ten miles long and five miles wide that was given the name of Pirate Island. The Mexican officers would not cross the Rio to patrol this "no man's land" and the Texas officers were without authority to do so inasmuch as it was Mexican property. Pirate Island soon became the stronghold of the lawless elements from both sides of the river, and a menace to American ranchers.

Captain Frank Jones, commander of Company D of the Frontier Battalion, of which Hughes was a sergeant, was ordered to take a detail of men and clean up Pirate Island. Leaving Hughes in charge of the headquarters at Alice, Captain Jones, with a party of Rangers and border officers, rode into the outlaw haven. He was killed while leading his men. The other officers were driven back by Mexicans concealed in the brush.

The command of the company was vested in Hughes who soon became captain. Hardly had the body of Jones been recovered when Hughes called the Rangers around him.

"Men," he said, "We've got a particular job to do. We know who the men are who killed Jones." He handed each Ranger a list of 17 names. "That's all right now," he told them.

In less than a year the 17 were dead. Along the Rio the Rangers were more highly respected than ever before.

THE Year 1896 brought glad tidings to the sporting element of El Paso. Rumor had it that Dan Stuart and others promoting the Bob Fitzsimmons-Peter Maher fight were going to hold it in El Paso. But the gentlemen who were promoting the fight had failed to take into consideration the fact that one, Charles

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Culberson, was Governor of Texas. Many people in El Paso were very much opposed to prize fighting and these people appealed to Governor Culberson.

The governor promised them that the fight would not be held in El Paso nor anywhere else in Texas.

But as the day on which the fight was scheduled to be held grew nearer the alarm of the people grew greater, for hundreds of undesirable citizens were swarming down on the town. After imbibing freely at the El Paso bars they stalked the streets demanding that the fight be held as promised despite Culberson and everyone else. It was even reported that Bat Masterson, famous gunfighter and sports writer, was coming to town with a hundred heavily-armed, heavy-drinking men to see to it that the fight plans were carried out.

These free-drinking hombres were busily engaged assaulting citizens and practicing burglary and other forms of larceny. John Selman, marshal of El Paso at the time, one night arrested more than 30 burglars —none of them Texans or Mexicans. Gunfights and fist fights in the saloons and on the streets were common. Local officials were unable to cope with the situation that had risen with the influx of these sporting strangers. Again the mayor and a delegation of citizens appealed to the chief executive at Austin.

"The Rangers will look into it," he answered.

The afternoon before the fight the Mayor went down to the depot.

Captain Hughes got off the train alone.

"Where," questioned the Mayor, "are your Rangers? One man can't handle this proposition."

"You ain't got but one fight, have you?" Hughes answered simply.

"One riot, one Ranger," the Mayor smiled. "All right, have a try at it. It's your funeral."

Other Rangers, four companies of Rangers in fact, arrived later but before they did Hughes had the situation in hand. He called on the promoters, the fighters, their managers and big-time gamblers, and Bat Masterson.

"Boys," Hughes told them. "You're not going to hold this fight in Texas. You understand that, don't you."

They looked into his eyes and then glanced down at the white-handled six-shooters at his sides and told him that they did understand—that they understood, very emphatically, the fight was not going to be held in Texas.

"Damn Culberson," said one of the promoters, "and damn these pure-hearted people, too, but Hughes—well, that's something else. God Amighty! Did you see those eyes while he was talking to us?"

The fight scene was moved to Mexico.

Hardly had peace been restored in El Paso when Hughes received word that a pack of thieves who were planning a train robbery were encamped in the Glass Mountains. The next day with Rangers Thal Cook and Bob Bryant, Hughes arrived in Alpine and set out upon the trail of these outlaws. Jim Poole, a deputy sheriff and Jim Stroud, whose fine stallion had been stolen by the thieves, accompanied the officers. Hughes and his party were on the trail for almost a week before they finally cornered three of the outlaws. Cook called upon them to surrender, they opened fire and the battle raged. One of the outlaws who had been wounded twice called to Cook:

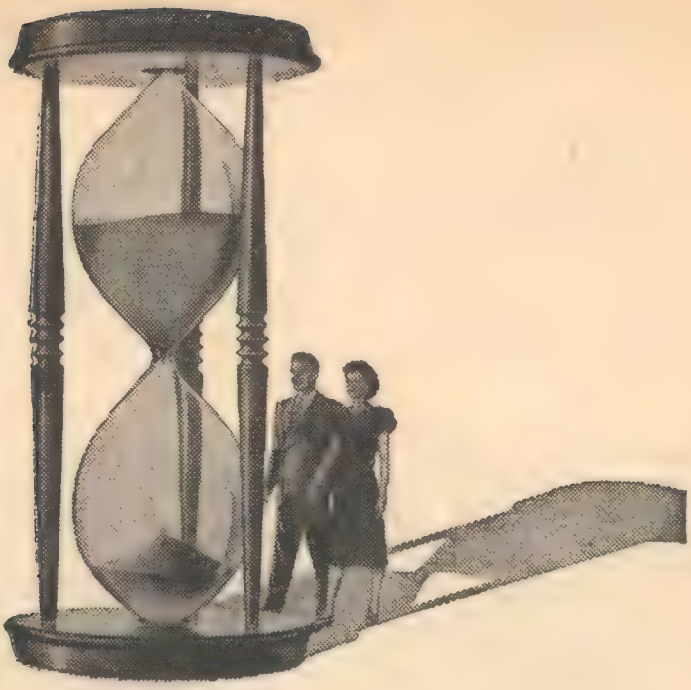
"I've had enough," he said, "let me come out from behind this rock!"

Instead of doing as Cook had directed the outlaw fired at the Ranger.

"Thereafter," Hughes reported to the Adjutant General, "he wasn't in any shape to surrender and was buried beside his two companions."

For almost thirty years John R. Hughes rode the plains and mountains, the pine woods and river bottoms of Texas and policed its towns—the most daring, resourceful, courageous and efficient officer, and the best known man in the Lone Star State. For almost thirty years he pushed the frontier farther and farther from the homes and churches and schools of Texas. In those years there were many gunfights —gunfights of which he would not talk. How many outlaws he was obliged to kill, no man except Hughes ever knew.

Up until a few months ago he was a familiar figure on the streets of Austin and El Paso and although his moustache was white he was as eagle-eyed, as brisk, as erect as ever.



The years melt away

(as the years always do)

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Lead Don't Mix With Silver!

By Damon Knight

He'd left his Owlhoot past on the backtrail, reckoned the drifter . . . until he poked his carcass into Bent Fork and met head-on the stern, steel-cold challenge: "You'll never leave this town alive, Silver Jim."

WHEN JIM WADE rode into Bent Fork, he was slouched over the kak in listless fashion. He was dressed in a ragged shirt and stained levis, and his famous silver-mounted twin guns had been replaced by a pair of ancient

long-barreled Peacemakers. Furthermore, he'd grown a black curly beard that softened the grim lines of his face.

There was no reason in the world why anyone should recognize him as Silver Jim Rivers, Border gunman. He had buried the Silver part up the trail, and wanted to forget about it.

But when he turned his weary horse into Bent Fork's rutted main street, past the first scattering of leaning, weather-blasted structures, it happened. A tall gawky native, hat pulled low over his face, sauntered out of an alley, directly in the gelding's path. Shifting a straw from one corner of his mouth to the other, he squinted casually up at Jim.

Then the man's jaw dropped, his eyes goggled. He let out a yell, spun on his heel, and hot-footed it down the length of the narrow street in a swirl of dust. Jim reined up thoughtfully, watching him skid to a halt in front of a saloon and scramble through the batwings.

Jim had been through too many hair-trigger scrapes in the three turbulent years of his manhood, not to know trouble when he smelled it. And it was certainly in the air here. It hung in the silence of the empty street like a sizzling fuse two inches

away from a powder-keg of calamity. It was almost visible around the still-swinging doors of the *Lady Luck*.

Jim watched those doors out of narrowed agate eyes as he rode unhurriedly toward them. He was almost opposite the hitch-rail when they exploded open again and a tangle of excited men spewed out.

The man in the lead, a gaunt, rangy jasper with drooping black moustaches bordering his stubbled jaw, took the saloon steps at a leap, heading straight for a roan stallion at the hitch rail. Then his head jerked up as he saw Jim's horse, and his eyes traveled up Jim's hunched, travel-stained figure until they met and locked with his level gaze.

Behind Handlebars more figures piled up, snatching at each other to keep their balance. Jim took them in out of the corner of his eye and concentrated on the foremost two—a tubby, fat-jowled sweating man with a sheriff's star on his black vest, and a runty little man with a sharp nose and yellow weasel's eyes. The other barflies in the background stopped when the first two did, and then slowly began to back off.

The three in front came out of their momentary paralysis almost simultaneously. The gaunt man ripped out a startled oath; the tubby sheriff gasped; and the little man snarled, with a feline twist to his pinched mouth. All three went for their guns.

The tall man was obviously the leader, and Jim in his split-second reckoning had figured him for the fastest on the draw. That was where he made his mistake. It was Weasel Eyes who shucked his gun first.

THE little man had fallen into a crouch, and now his right hand slapped downward and came up full of iron in a blur of speed. Jim, who had been watching Handlebars' gunhand, was caught off guard. He had barely time to throw himself sideways in the saddle before Weasel Eyes' gun blasted viciously, point-blank. The bullet plucked lightly at Jim's outflung sleeve and thunked into a building across the street.

Jim's gun leaped into his hand even as he flung himself aside, and he snapped a shot at the little killer—saw him spin with the impact of the slug, whirling his gun wide, and clap a hand to his forearm. But the next instant lead was singing all around him. Weasel Eyes had joggled the gaunt man just as he fired, but even so a bullet tore along the side of Jim's neck, bringing a gush of warm blood. The sheriff's contribution lifted Jim's crumpled hat neatly off his head.

Then Jim whipped his left-hand gun out and the two muzzles snapped down, leveling unerringly on the two men's bellies. "Drop 'em!" Jim barked.

The cold, certain death staring out of those twin black muzzles froze both of them instantly in their tracks—the sheriff with his gun half-raised, the lanky man about to throw down for another shot. The sheriff's eyes widened; his jaw went slack, and the gun dropped out of palsied fingers. After a stubborn instant, the tall man followed suit.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jim glimpsed one of the motley crowd in the background inching for a gun. He said sharply, addressing Handlebars, "Tell your pals to keep their hands away from their smokepoles, unless you figure your chest needs ventilation!"

The tall man stared at him for a moment without answering. Then he said bitterly, "All right, boys, you heard him."

Jim's guns were rock-steady. He said grimly, "Now I want some answers, and I want 'em quick and to the point. What was the idea of slinging lead at me the minute I ride into a town I've never seen before? What are you hombres afraid of? Who do you think I am?"

They looked at him blankly. "He's gone plumb loco!" the fat sheriff whispered.

The little man with the venomous eyes snarled and spat. "You boys gonna fall for that?" he cried. "It's another of his lousy tricks!"

"Yeah," said Handlebars slowly, and his long jaw set in a mule-stubborn line. He stared defiantly up at Jim. "I don't know what your game is, but if you think five months made enough difference so we won't recognize you, you're loco like Sam says. Matter of fact, you was loco to come back here at all. You got the drop on us now, all right, but you can't keep it. You won't leave this town alive!"

He stopped, having said his piece, and for a long moment no one moved or spoke.

Jim's face kept its stony, impassive lines, but inside he felt as if he had been catapulted out of reality into a world of nightmare. What the tall man said was true—he couldn't hold a town full of angry men at bay indefinitely, and consequently he was in one hell of a tight. Well, he'd been in tougher spots before, but he liked to know the reason when he got his tail in a knot. And there wasn't any why to this whole crazy business!

The pound of hoofbeats scattered his crowding thoughts, and he glimpsed a slim figure riding toward him up the street. He caught a swift picture of wind-whipped auburn curls under a low-crowned white hat, of startlingly blue eyes widening as the girl looked at him. Then red lips opened in a gasp of naked surprise, and she cried, *"Enoch!"*

And that word was nearly Jim Wade's undoing. Because it gave him the clue. In one blinding, earthshaking flash of incredible insight all the helter-skelter, mismatched pieces of the puzzle began to fall together. Jim was dazed by his own lack of comprehension in not having seen the only possible answer before. He didn't see the men diving for their guns until it was almost too late.

A .45 slug keening by his ear reminded him. He jerked aside, instinctively throwing down on the man who had fired—just in time to take a bullet in the shoulder. The shock of it whirled him around in the saddle, sending his shot wide. Then another slug raked the biceps of his left arm, and a stickening pain shot all the way down to his numbed hand. He had time to fire once at the tubby sheriff, and saw him bowled backwards with his hands clutching his side, and then Jim toppled out of the saddle.

He landed sharply, awkwardly in the dust and rolled over quickly, still grasping his right-hand gun. The men were fanning out now, some scuttling for cover and others cutting around to get him from the side. Jim pressed himself flat, swiveling his one gun, and caught a blocky gunhand in midstride. The fellow threw up his hands, his spine arching; then his legs wilted and he slid down the angle of the raised boardwalk.

A bullet slapped into the dust inches from Jim's hip, and he turned quickly to snap a shot a gangling ranny to his right. The gun bucked back against his palm, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the man fall like a lightning-struck tree to land with a splash in the horse trough.

But bullets were whining all around him now. One traced a sharp line of fire almost the length of one outstretched leg; another clipped his already injured shoulder. In another second he'd be a gone goose.

It was the girl who saved him. She had reined up a short distance away, stunned by the sudden blaze of gunfire. Now she spurred her pinto sharply forward—straight into the scattering group of men. Bent low over the animal's neck, her eyes blazing, she charged into them, lashing about her with a short riding whip.

They scattered in terror, stumbling over each other, and hurt and dazed with pain as Jim was, he was thinking that here was a girl to ride the river with.

She reined up as the last of the men disappeared through the quivering batwings, and speared Jim with an imperious glance. "What are you waiting for?" she called clearly. "Ride!"

JIM grinned, lurched to his feet and fell into a stumbling run toward his spooked horse. He rounded the animal's flank, patted it reassuringly and put a foot in the stirrup. A quick glance toward the saloon doors showed him a white blur of a face peering over them. He caught the motion of a raised gun, and fired swiftly.

Jim saw the man jerk back from the doorway as lead splintered the door inches from his face. He took one last searching look around and then swung into the saddle.

The girl was waiting impatiently for him a few yards down the street in the direction from which she had come. Jim put spurs to his bay and caught up with her.

Together they thundered past the outskirts of Bent Fork. A scattering fusillade followed them, but none of the shots came near.

Looking back, he could see that queer group clustered again at the hitchrail, firing after them. The sheriff was not in evidence, but Jim could clearly make out

the tall lean figure of the man with the handlebars. Beside him was Weasel Eyes, shooting with his one good hand. They were just pouching their guns, scrambling for horses, when a turn in the road took Jim and the girl out of sight.

As they rode, Jim's mind worked like lightning, remembering the swift events that had followed his coming to Bent Fork, trying to beat back the pain that hammered at him long enough to piece together the things he had learned.

The girl faced grimly ahead, taut, intent lines forming around her full mouth. She turned her head only once, after they had struck a faint, winding trail that led toward low hills in the distance. She looked at Jim, swaying in his saddle, with concern in her wide eyes. "Can you make it, Enoch?" she asked.

"I'm not Enoch," Jim gritted. His left shoulder was a ball of white fire, and he thought the bone must be broken, but he gazed back at her with humorously slitted eyes. She was staring at him over the waving mane of her horse as if she thought he was delirious.

"No, it's true," he said. "I'm Jim Wade. I thought Enoch was dead. Where is he?"

"I can't believe it," she said after a moment, "Your nose, your eyes—your hair is black, but I supposed you'd dyed it. . . ."

"Where is he?" Jim repeated through clenched teeth.

Swift pain touched her lips. "I don't know," she told him. "I thought—when I saw you—you look enough like Enoch looked the day he disappeared to fool his own mother—"

"Disappeared how?"

"They say he ran away, and they have proof enough to choke a horse. But I think Blue Martin—that's the tall man—knows more than he's telling. Enoch would never have run off with all his friends' money like that, no matter what anybody says."

"Damn!" said Jim.

"I'm sorry." She flashed him a sweet contrite smile. "But it *is* so complicated, and this is no time to tell you. Can you make it?"

"I dunno," Jim said. "Where to?"

"To an old nester's place in the hills if we can shake them off. If we can get to that draw straight ahead, we have a chance. Listen! We haven't got much time."

A bullet whined overhead and Jim twisted in the saddle to see a group of horsemen just rounding the clump of cottonwoods they had passed at the trail's beginning.

The girl was speaking urgently, but her voice sounded suddenly far away. "When we get to the second turning in the canyon, you jump off where it's rocky and won't show. Keep going straight to the right, toward the highest saddleback you see. Old Billy lives just beyond that. He was a friend of Enoch's, and he'll take care of you."

Jim looked ahead, blinking his eyes to clear away the cottony haze. They were just coming to the draw between two low, eroded hills. He looked back, with an effort, and saw that their pursuers were gaining. Another shot horneted past.

He realized finally that she expected some answer, and brought his mind to bear on the problem. "Okay," he said finally. "Second turn saddleback. What about you?"

"I'll be all right. I'll lead your horse, and in this rough country they won't be able to tell you're not on it until it's too late. I may even be able to lose them. They'll be angry, but they wouldn't dare harm a woman."

They were in the canyon now, speeding up a shallow, rocky slope toward where the draw banked sharply past a huge granite boulder. They reached the turn, rounded it with the horses' hoofs flinging shale. A hundred yards ahead and coming swiftly closer, Jim could see the second turning.

The girl spurred her mare ahead as they rounded it, and Jim saw that the canyon narrowed here to single-file width. Another advantage. The walls were lower now, and sparsely grown with scrub oak. They came to a stretch of naked gray slide-rock, and the girl reached back to grab his horse's bridle.

"Now!" she cried. "Jump!"

Jim straightened himself in the kak with an effort. He got one leg over the cantle. "What's your name?" he called.

"Marsha. Goodbye!"

Jim heaved himself out into space with an awkward surge. The gray face of

the canyon wall came up with blurred speed to meet him; then it struck him a bonecrushing wallop in the chest and arms. He flung himself erect immediately, seeing stars, and scrambled blindly for holds in the loose rock.

HIS heart was pounding violently. He pawed at the rough stone, scarcely feeling it over the heavy throb of pain, and forced himself upwards. He could just see the rim through a red haze that filmed his vision, but he seemed to be reaching it too slowly.

He heard the pound of hoofs down the hard-packed trail. It sounded distant, but he realized fuzzily that this was illusion, and redoubled his efforts. The top of the bank came nearer, and he grabbed at it, pulled himself over. The sparse branches of some kind of bush whipped at his face as he toppled. He had just sense enough left to flatten out and roll before the horses went by, one after another, on the trail below.

He saw a gray Stetson bobbing past, then a tall black one. Then, as the next bronc thundered by, nothing at all. This seemed very queer to him, until he remembered the half-pint Weasel Eyes. He heard a confused shouting die away in the distance, and then he thought he'd close his eyes just for a minute.

He came to with a start, floundering, some remembrance of danger prodding him to consciousness. He flung an alarmed glance at the sky overhead, saw that the sun was still high. He couldn't have been out long.

But it was time to be on the move, all the same. If that gang hadn't caught up with the girl yet, they would soon. Then they'd be casting back along the trail, hunting him. He had to get away.

Jim turned, coming to his knees, and winced at the stab of agony that shot through his injured arm. He blinked his eyes. Ahead of him the hill country reared itself, higher and higher, in upflung mounds and ridges. Almost straight ahead, between two steep, brushy slopes, was the saddleback the girl must have meant—a high, ochre-yellow pass between two hills, with a few straggling clumps of pine on it. It was a good mile away.

Jim dragged himself to his feet, cursing softly, and started. He blundered up a little brush-choked draw, stumbling over hidden boulders and dead limbs and trying vainly to keep the branches out of his face. Once his feet shot clean out from under him, and the thumping fall slapped the last ounce of wind out of his chest. Somehow, after an interval, he clawed his way erect again and stumbled on.

The going grew a little easier. The brush thinned out as he climbed higher, and for a while he kept to the smooth tops of the ridges. Then, fearing the returning Bent Fork men would spot him in the open, he took to the gullies again. He fell often; he could tell he was losing a lot of blood. He hoped none of it had spattered down there where he'd jumped off his bay. He didn't think he'd been bleeding much that far back in the nightmare, but he couldn't be sure.

It seemed to be getting darker, but he squinted up at the sun and saw it still there in the middle of the sky, a queer, dully-shining ball, rimmed with fuzzy black. Jim began to be afraid he'd be unable to see the saddleback when he got close.

But he made it. How, he could never figure afterwards. He came to with a sudden shock out of the half-daze he'd been moving in, and found himself crawling on hands and knees over a bare, yellow stretch. Bounding it, beyond a crazily tilted edge to his left, was blue sky.

He felt like a drunken fly on a wall, but he stubbornly fought back the vertigo and crawled toward the diagonal horizon. It receded gradually before him and then abrupt blue-green, misty hills began to appear beyond it, right-side up. He realized that he was rounding the shoulder of the saddleback, and the world came back into focus.

The valley beyond was smooth, cottony woodland, infinitely restful to his eyes. He crawled toward it eagerly, feeling the slope beneath him become progressively more gentle. Finally he just let himself go and rolled.

The second time around, he caught a whirling glimpse of a little frame cabin down in the hollow, with a thin blue wisp of smoke curling up from it. When he crashed into a clump of willows and stopped, he thought to himself, *I'm almost there. I got to get up and finish the haul.*

But he couldn't seem to convince himself that it was worth the trouble. So he lay there, feeling very quiet and peaceful, and not caring much about anything.

Even when he heard brush popping nearby, he didn't look up. Then big, rough hands grabbed him under the shoulders, and a red face ringed with shaggy gray beard swam into his vision. He heard a ragged gasp: *"Enoch!"*

"Damn it," said Jim sleepily but distinctly, "I'm not—"

Then the dark blanket of nothingness swooped in, and that was the last he remembered.

II

THE SKY was green. Not the pearly apple-shade that sometimes comes with dawn, but a soft, dark, living green. Jim stared at it curiously, and it gradually resolved into a high ragged ceiling of spruce and fir. He was lying on a pallet of fir branches, in a little brush-rimmed clearing. He heard the quiet, moving sound of a stream somewhere off to his left.

He stirred, looking at the clean bandages around his arm and shoulder. Then he simply lay for awhile, too weak to rise and look around. It was very pleasant here—still, and fresh-smelling, and with the vital hardness of the ground pressing through the pallet into his back.

Presently he heard the faint sound of someone moving toward him through the brush.

He looked up as the red-faced man parted the branches and stepped quietly through. "Hello," Jim said.

"Hello. You're around sooner than I expected." The man eased his huge body to the ground beside Jim and stuck out a hand the size of a horseshoe. "I'm Billy Koller."

Jim took the hand. "Glad to know you, Billy. How long I been snoozing?"

"Long enough," the big man grunted. "I dunno what brought you up here, cowboy, but you couldn't a' picked a worse place to blunder into. You're in a hole, and no mistake."

"I know it," said Jim. "But there are a lot of other things I don't know. I been trying to get some answers ever since I blew into town, but looks like I couldn't stop gettin' shot at long enough. Where am I, to start with?"

"You're in the woods about a half-mile from my cabin. 'Twasn't safe to keep you at my place, even though you hadn't oughtta been moved by rights. That damn little Mouse Parker's been snooping around twice a'ready. He knows well enough mine's the only place you coulda been heading for." Koller looked at him broodingly. "I thought you was Enoch to start with, like everybody else did, or I dunno's I'd'a bothered with you."

Jim grinned wryly. "Well, I'm beholden to you just the same, friend. Now, if you'll just put me straight on a couple things, I'll be movin' on."

Old Billy frowned and spat. "Fer gosh sake, don't go and get yer bedamned dander up. I swear, you're as like Enoch as a pea's twin brother. He was my friend, but I couldn't put up with 'im more'n ten minutes at a time."

He rose, picked up a sack of food that lay near Jim's bed, and began preparing a cold meal. "You don't have to prove to me how much guts you got," he went on morosely. "The best thing you could do 'ud be to hightail it out o' this whole country, but you're in no shape even to try it. I've took care of you this far, and I'll nurse you till you're able to travel—if you live that long."

Over Jim's protest that he didn't need any help, Billy propped the injured man up enough to eat. He dished out the jerked beef and cold beans onto a battered tin plate and then squatted down on his hunkers, watching while Jim wolfed the fare.

"Why should people thinkin' I was Enoch make me target for all that gunplay?" he asked through a mouthful of beans.

"It won't do you no good to know that dirty business, one way or another, since you ain't him," said Billy. "But them bullet holes sort of gives you a right to cou'osity, and I reckon you won't give me or nobody else no rest till you get the facts.

"Well, Enoch drifted into Bent Fork about two years ago. He looked just like you, only with that white hair and beard of his, so white it looked almost blue, an' o' course he was some scrawnier. But he stood straight as a poplar, an' there was

just as much hell in them gray eyes o' his as there musta been when he was twenty years younger.

"He tried homesteadin' first, over in Two Sqaws Valley, between my place and Marsha Camp's. Then he quit that and done a trick as sheriff when Tom Bates was kilt by rustlers. Done a good job, too—cleaned out the gang that backshot Tom an' kept things right peaceful around town. But he got tired o' bein' a lawman after maybe eight-ten months, an' allowed as how he was goin' to turn prospector.

"Well, we all figgered he was crazy, but nobody done any laughin' to his face. Nobody had the heart to try and auger him out of it, neither. He was so sure he was gonna make a pile this time, like he was about everything when he started it. Wasn't a man, woman or child in the valley that didn't love him, I reckon. You just couldn't help it. But, by Gad!" the giant slammed a fist violently into his palm, "if I was to see him today, I'd sure as hell want an accountin' afore I made up my mind I wasn't goin' to beat his brains out!"

Jim had stopped eating. "Go on," he said quietly.

"All right," old Billy took a fresh chaw and went on after a moment. "He got him a prospector's kit an' a mule, an' went up into the canyon country between the Big an' Little Forks. We didn't see hide nor hair of 'im for a month, an' then he come back into town, dusty an' damn near beat out, but with his ore bag full of samples. Said he'd hit the biggest lode since the *Lucky Cuss*. Said there was enough silver there to make everybody in this half of Nevada rich as Croesus.

"Anybody could see there was silver in them samples, all right, an' we bought 'im enough drinks to founder a mule, but nobody figgered he'd really struck it as rich as he said. But we raised him a $500 loan in no time so's he could apply for a patent. Then the report come back from the assay office. The report said that ore'd run as high as fifteen thousand to the ton. An' then—

"Why, man, that old coot was just about Gawdalmighty to us. When he told us he was gonna stake a joint claim in the names of every settler in the county, I reckon we woulda licked his feet if he'd asked it." Old Billy spread his thorn-scabbed hands and looked at them musingly.

"This's always been pretty good country around here, for nesters an' cattlemen both, but nobody's ever took a fortune out of it. An' we've had a few lean years recent. Blue Martin is the only one you could maybe describe as a rich man in this whole region. The rest of us . . . Well, I reckon we all had the same dream, when that report come back. A man has t' scrabble hard for what he gets, except once in a while when somethin' like this comes along—like a free gift from Heaven, no strings attached. That silver woulda meant plenty to every man around Bent Fork, even an old bachelor like me."

HE paused. Then, "Huh!" Billy grunted. "Bachelor, hell. I got a family back in Arkansas I ain't seen in five years. Allus figgered I'd send for 'em when I got enough laid away, but seemed like every time I'd take a little out o' the land, somethin'd happen and the land 'ud take it back. One year it'ud be a forest fire that burned me out, next the crops 'ud be lean, or . . . well, anyway, this time it looked like I wouldn't have to wait no longer.

"Old Enoch took us out too see his strike that next week—Sam Nagle, Blue Martin an' me. Blindfolded us the last few miles but we didn't think there was anything funny about that at the time.

"He showed us the seam in the side of a little sandstone canyon that was like a hundred others in that country. It was narrow, but Enoch said he'd tunneled back for twenty feet on both sides, an' it got wider the further he went. We could see where a rockslide'd buried all but the first few feet of his tunnels, just like he told us, an' it all seemed reasonable enough.

"That was the hitch, though, that rockslide. That seam was set in such soft, crumbly rock that nobody but a fool'd try to take any more'n samples out by hand. You try to excavate very far in that kind o' formation, an' a slide'll bury the whole canyon, an' you with it.

"But with some fancy minin' machinery, we could slice off the whole top o' that cliff an' work the seam down like you'd work a quarry. I guess they was a silly

smile underneath every blindfold as we rode out of that canyon. We was all of us talkin' plans to beat sixty, an' I know I was grinning all over my dangfool face.

"Blue an' Sam an' me, we put in everythin' we had, and everybody in the valley dug into his savin's if he had any. An' Blue helped them as didn't by makin' loans on property. First mistake he ever made in the money line, but it looked like a sure investment, after what we'd seen.

"Then Enoch rode off with ten thousand dollars of the valley's money an' young Bill Camp for a bodyguard to buy the minin' machinery personal. Well, he ain't been back and no more has Bill, and there ain't been any word. That was five months back."

There was a long pause.

"It's been a long time since I saw Enoch," said Jim, "and I didn't exactly come here looking for him. I was just travelin' for my health, y' might say." Jim smiled wryly as he thought that the furore down Nogales way he had been riding away from was nothing to the double-trouble he had ridden into in Nevada.

But Billy had jerked his head back. "You know that swindler?"

"Sure I know him. An' watch what names you call him," Jim added softly. "Enoch Wade is my father." Billy's jaw had ceased its rhythmic chomping and his mouth had fallen open a foot. Jim kept right on talking. "He ain't swindled nobody in this valley, and I aim to prove it, once I get off this damn pallet."

Billy stuck out his massive paw. "I don't know how you'll do it, boy, but I'm with you till it's proved one way or t'other. Enoch was my good friend till this happened."

A twig snapped, sharp as a pistol shot.

Jim Wade slapped for leather that wasn't there. The snake-rapid move shot forked lightning through his chest and shoulder.

From one side of the clearing, his back plastered against the inadequate shelter of a young spruce, Koller swept his rifle in an uncertain arc. "All right," he shouted. "We heard you. Come out with yer hands high! An' make it fast."

"I'm coming as fast as I can, Billy," an amused feminine voice floated through the trees. "But I can't get my hands up; they're too full."

"Dang yer pretty hide, Marsha," the big man complained, lowering his rifle. "I didn't think you was comin' today. Whynt'cha sing out?"

"Couldn't. I've been beating the brush for one hour, trying to find you two without making any noise. You've got company back home, Billy."

The voice had been coming closer with every word. Marsha edged sideways between two spruce trees and stood smiling at the two men. Her arms were piled high, with a battered bullet-holed Stetson on top of the load.

"Yeah?" said Billy sharply. "Who?"

"Mouse Parker's big white horse is tied up at your railing, and there's pipe smoke coming peacefully out your window. Looks as if he meant to sit there until you got back."

"Thanks, Marsha. Reckon I better go settle whatever's on his mind this time, afore he gets tired waitin' and takes to huntin' me up." Billy raised his free hand to Jim, and then paused. "He see you, Marsha?"

"You trained me better than that, Billy Koller!" She laughed. "As far as Mouse Parker knows, I'm still out on my own range where I was when he rode past."

"Good girl." Billy wheeled and melted into the brush.

Marsha walked slowly over to Jim's pallet. She sat down, crossing her legs and collapsing on them. Packages spilled in all directions, except a box she kept rigid in her left hand and steadied with her right as she landed. Glass tinkled lightly against glass. "Whew, I'm tired. How are you, Jim Wade? You're looking much better," she said warmly.

"Why, I'm—you been here before?" he asked.

"Every day, almost, to Billy's. Every day I could make it. But I was only out here once."

Jim felt gratitude sweep over him in a rush of feeling. "You saved my life, Marsha," he said, looking at her steadily.

She flushed a warm crimson. "Oh, nonsense. You were doing all right by yourself. I just butted in like I always do." She plucked at the packages distractedly. "Look, here's your hat."

Jim smiled grimly. "But where's my hurry? I can't barely move." He stopped

short at the expression on her face. "I'm not complaining. That was just a joke. Thanks for saving my hat for me. I don't rightly feel dressed without it."

"Your horse is over at my spread, too, when you're ready for him. And your gun-belt is right behind you, under that mound of brush there."

"You're like a fairy godmother," Jim said, slitting his eyes at her.

Marsha blushed again. She got busy opening packages. Chicken soup, fried chicken, coffee; playing cards; a man's shirt and clean neckerchief. Jim watched her while she arranged her gifts before him.

"Hungry?"

"Not yet. Billy fed me just before you came. I will be later, though, sure enough," he said awkwardly.

"Well, I'll stay until then and heat it up for you. It'll be safer, then, anyhow. Once Mouse Parker goes back to town, there'll be nobody to see the smoke but old Billy."

There was an awkward silence.

"Would you rather not talk!" she asked delicately. "You're still pretty weak, I expect."

"I don't feel like facin' a stampedin' herd, and that's a fact," Jim admitted. "But I'd sure like to listen."

"ALL right," said Marsha, in her fluting voice. "What shall I talk about?"

"I oughta warn you, I won't hear for lookin'," Jim confessed. They laughed together. They sat in companionable silence, until Marsha began to nod.

"You are tired, aren't you? Is it a long trip over here?" Jim asked suddenly.

"'Tisn't that. It's the Bar M, my spread. The man you shot down in front of the *Lady Luck* was one of Blue Martin's cowpokes, and Blue hired away one of my two hands to replace him. He was shiftless, but one hand less does make a difference. Now the other man claims he's feeling sickly. I've done the best I could, but what with Bill gone this half year, the spread's going to pieces."

"Bill?"

"My brother. He went away with Enoch. . . . When I first saw you in town that day, I thought surely I was going to have news of him then." Marsha sighed, and her head drooped. "I don't even know if he's alive," she whispered. Suddenly she gasped, and her eyes glinted wetly in the dappled light. "I shouldn't have said that! I'm a blundering fool! Because if Bill's dead, then Enoch—"

Jim nodded somberly. He hunted for words to console the girl, but there didn't seem to be much he could say. His eyes followed the glistening sweep of her auburn curls, and the proud line of her neck, bent now. He swallowed miserably, as he saw the tears coursing down her cheeks.

A dog bayed suddenly, very close. Jim thrust out his good right hand to snatch reassuring cold steel from the gun belt beside him. A branch crackled. Worming his way frantically through the closely grown underbrush, a well-fed hound-dog broke clear and shot into the clearing. He bounded up to Marsha with every sign of intense joy, barking in short, excited bursts, trying to lick her face and hands as she held him off. The girl turned a startled expression to Jim.

"That's Mouse Parker's Tom!" she cried.

"And that's Mouse Parker," added Jim grimly. With complete disregard of how much noise he might be making, a third person was rapidly approaching. In a moment, he too fought his way clear of the entangling growth.

A foot below where Jim automatically looked shone Mouse Parker's yellow eyes. As Jim's eyes whipped downward, they encountered the business end of a .45, and he raised his Peacemaker to meet it. He swore softly; Marsha was directly in his line of fire, and the girl sat transfixed in frozen terror. Jim tried, just once, to shift his position, but stiffness grabbed cruelly at his muscles. He groaned and fell back.

"Don't move, Marsha, not an inch," warned the little man, seeing his advantage. "Come here to me, Tom, an' hush yer yap."

The hound moved slowly across the clearing, whimpering his eagerness to play with the girl.

"How'd you find us, Mouse?" she asked suddenly, throwing her head back in the imperious gesture Jim remembered.

"Why, Marsha, Tom here'd trail you

down Hell Creek an' back. When he began to dance around back there on the trail, I figgered you was out here playin' nurse, an' I just natcherly come along to see."

"It wasn't your affair," she said sharply.

"No? With a certain silver gelding in your string at the Bar M all of a sudden? And Old Billy off in the woods every day, neglectin' his land? You couldn'ta expected to keep Enoch Wade hidden very long, Marsha, with the whole valley after his scalp. Aw, don't take on so," he added, kindly enough. "What call you got to protect that swindler, anyhow?"

Jim raised his head, ignoring the stab of pain through his left shoulder. "Take a good look, Mouse," he invited softly.

"That's no good with him," Marsha pointed out in a forlorn little voice. "He never know Enoch. He never even saw Bent Fork until a couple of months ago."

Mouse jutted his pointy chin, his yellow gaze probing for the trick.

"Just the same, take a good look," Jim insisted. "Enoch Wade was forty-five, wasn't he? Hell, I may be a dead ringer for him, but I ain't even twenty-three yet. That ain't an old man's hand!"

Mouse's gun never wavered, but doubt had crept into his voice. "If you're not Enoch, who are you?"

"The name is Jim—Jim Wade."

Marsha flung Mouse Parker a triumphant look. "And you can tell that to the valley!" she cried.

For a moment Mouse's eyes remained slitted. Then, deliberately, he holstered his hogleg. "I'll tell 'em," he drawled. "But it's a bad name to brag on hereabouts!"

III

THE SHACK, squatted crazily near the edge of a space that had once been cleared. Weeds sprouted everywhere, and the cut-back growth was out again in ragged profusion. The mournful strains of a border ballad floated from the shack, interrupted by gurgles and splashings. Two Squaws Valley echoed with the contented sounds of a hombre getting ready to spread himself a little bit.

Marsha cooeyed from beyond a stand of pine at the same moment that Billy Koller rode up to the shack from the opposite direction. Jim harked to the sounds and splashed water furiously over his face. He stuck his head out the little window and shouted, "Welcome, the both of you! Come on in!"

Looping the reins over his ancient piebald's neck, Billy waited for Marsha to dismount, and they came in together. Jim buried his face in the towel, rubbing vigorously, and then threw it aside. He grinned at the two in front of him.

"Well, I'll be blowed," Billy said slowly. "You sure look different, Jim Wade, from when I first saw you. Y' look years younger 'thout that beard."

"I feel different," Jim said, flexing his muscles. "I feel good. Afternoon, Marsha!" He ducked his head in the girl's direction.

"Why did you shave it off, Jim?" she asked, holding out the little bundle in her hand. "Not that I don't like it. It's an improvement!"

"Got in my way," said Jim briefly. "Itched. I wasn't used to a beard nohow." He rubbed his chin. "When I grew it, I wasn't expectin' it to be all kinks and curls like that one, and I didn't like the feel of it much." He was unwrapping the bundle as he spoke. "You mended my clothes, Marsha, 'stead o' just washin' 'em. You're mighty kind!"

Marsha made a face. "And all this time since your shoulder began to mend, who's been helping me round up strays, and put the Bar M back in shape? A little washing and sewing is the least I can do in return." She sat carefully on an upended packing box, flicking the little whip she always carried when she was riding the trail alone, and watched Jim buckle on his gun-belt. "You riding tonight, Jim?"

"Yep. Goin' in town, to see what I can see."

"Now what y' wanta do that for?" Billy asked crossly. "If there's somethin' you need, I'll be pleased to bring it out for you. I been totin' your supplies all these weeks, and I didn't aim to stop till you was well again."

"Well?" Jim snorted. "I'm well. I don't cotton to sittin' out here in Two Squaws no longer. I gotta do somethin', Billy. I got things to find out!" They had moved outside the shack now, and

Jim picked up a pebble from the ground. He tossed it from one corded hand to the other, and then hurled it against the side of the lean-to. It made a spanging sound and bounced off in a wide arc. The restless fists clenched.

"Well," Billy said practically, "What y' aim to do?"

"I don't rightly know. Back-track Enoch first of all, I reckon. Find out what all he did, and why, just before him and Bill Camp left town."

"Sam Nagle did all that pretty thorough," Billy offered.

"Yeah? What reason I got to trust Sam Nagle? I gotta see for myself, Billy."

"Well," the gray-bearded giant gave in, "I'll ride along with you, if you won't mind company."

Marsha was biting her lips, looking from one to the other. "I'd ask you both to be careful, if I thought it would do any good," she said slowly. "I reckon I'll be riding on home, Jim. Good luck."

Jim watched for a long time as the girl galloped off. Suddenly his eyes narrowed, and his hands hovered over his gun-butts. "Let's get goin', Billy."

THE sun was still high as the silver gelding and the piebald mare clattered out toward the trail a few moments later.

Jim looked around him a moment, and then slewed his gaze back and forth, back and forth, in front of him. "The Wade homestead sure ain't much," he remarked wryly.

"It's fell in on itself a little bit since Enoch left," Billy admitted. "Neat enough when he lived here. But he wasn't never cut out for farmin'. Stayed here less than a year and he never—what th'—"

"Duck, Billy!" Steel blossomed in Jim's hand as he threw himself sidewise in the saddle. Two bullets whined past each other in mid-air, but the slug aimed at Jim went wide. His own shot tore unerringly into the brush. An unearthly scream of pain ripped through the mêlée.

Jim spurred his horse forward and to his left. He found cover, and slid down the gelding's off-side in one motion. He worked his way carefully toward the bushwhacker's cubby. There was no motion, no sound, in front of him, only a depression in the grass.

Suddenly the white blur of a face reared up ten feet away, and a shaking hand fought a heavy Colt for aim. The smoking Peacemaker in Jim's hand spat lead.

When Billy came puffing up, Jim had torn open the dead man's shirt. "Thought he was after Marsha when I first saw him," he grunted. "Who is it, Billy? You know him?"

"Know him? Sure I do. Only handle he's got is Slim, though. Never heard his last name." Jim methodically investigated pockets, while the old man rattled on in wordy excitement. "He come to town some months back. Said he was lookin' for a job, but he never took one, so far's I know. Hung out with Sam Nagle, Parker, Martin —that bunch, playin' poker in the *Lady Luck*."

Jim rose and dusted off his hands. "Nothin' in his pockets, except makin's and some junk." He stared thoughtfully at Old Billy. "This answers one of my questions. Somebody in Bent Fork wants me dead—not because he thinks I'm Enoch, but because he knows I'm not." Billy nodded solemnly. "Enoch and Bill didn't run off with that money, like the valley believes. And they didn't meet with no natural accident, like Marsha thinks. Somebody in Bent Fork knows where they are, alive or dead. And whoever it is knows where that money is, too."

He vaulted onto the silver gelding's back. "Now I know a little clearer what I'm lookin' for. Purty soon I aim to know who!"

STUNNED silence shouldered through the swinging doors with the two men, and spread through the *Lady Luck* like another presence. Men held their glasses in mid-air, or left their mouths hanging open in mid-sentence.

Billy Koller picked up the silence and ripped it apart. "Howdy, Bob," he called in a loud voice to the barkeep. Voices broke loose in a steady murmur as Bob bustled out from behind the splintery imitation mahogany. "Howdy, Billy, howdy! What'll you have? Cooler tonight, ain't it?"

Billy cut in on the little man's chatter, "This here's my friend Jim. Jim Wade.

He's lookin' for his paw."

In Bob's throat the Adam's apple rode up and down, striving to let the words get by. "Ain't we all?" he finally squeaked, and beat a hasty retreat behind the bar.

"Glad t' meet you, Bob," Jim called to the retreating back. He laughed.

A woman detached herself from the group at the bar and walked slowly past Jim, swinging her hips. He returned her look measure for measure, but made no sign.

"Evenin', Belle," said Billy.

"Evening," she returned unhurriedly. Her voice was soft and silky like the warm brown of her hair and eyes. Belle had class, and that lacy shawl on her shoulders had cost somebody a good many dollars—or more likely, pesos, Jim thought, looking closer. What was an obviously city-bred dance-hall girl doing in this one-horse town? She wasn't young any longer, but she certainly hadn't started to fade yet!

"Two up, gents!" Bob slid the foaming amber glasses expertly down the bar, and sidled closer. "You sure got nerve, Wade. I guess there ain't a person in this room wouldn't like to have your scalp, except me!"

"That so?" said Jim. "What makes you different?"

"Why, bartendin' is my business," Bob returned defensively. "I got safer uses for my money—what I've got of it—than buyin' into no silver mine."

"That so?" said Jim again, hoisting his tumbler. "An' the people that did . . . they got somethin' against me?"

Bob moistened his lips incredulously. "Don't you know about the mortgages an' loan papers people made to back your paw? They most of 'em stand to lose their propitty. The stubborn ones—an' that's a good half—"druther leave town than work their places for somebody else's benefit. O' course, it's tol'able generous in Blue to offer to keep them on as his tenants. But Nevada breeds 'em independent. They're mostly plannin' to move on." He licked his lips again, and looked around uneasily. "But they mean to take some hide as they go, I reckon."

A low whistle streaked through Billy Koller's shaggy beard. "Blue Martin is goin' to end up ownin' this whole valley purt' nigh, except for a few hold-outs that didn't borrow no money from him, ain't he?"

"An' the mine, too, maybe?" suggested Jim.

"Not likely," Bob snapped. "Nobody knowed where the mine was but Enoch, and he skipped."

"It's still there, ain't it? Don't try to tell me there's nobody out there lookin' for it!"

"'Sa fact, just the same," the little barkeep insisted. "Blue won't grubstake no prospectors. Says it wouldn't be fair till the year's up. Should Enoch come back and get in some work on that mine before November, the whole valley would still hold the joint claim."

Except they're losing their papers to it. Jim mutely offered his glass for a refill, and the barkeep went on.

"Blue says it would be agin the law of man and nature for one lucky cuss to jump that claim."

"Besides, who could afford to work it if he found it?" put in Billy. "You couldn't do it without minin' machinery, and nobody hereabouts has any money left."

Jim swiveled as the bat wings slammed apart. He cradled his glass, foaming again, in his left hand, and hooked his right thumb lazily into his belt.

Blue Martin bulled forward, his big frame dwarfing the other men with him, and the sheriff who waddled alongside.

"Glad to see you up and about, boy," he boomed. "Sorry I misrecognized you a while back, but I gotta admit you sure looked like Enoch. You still do—but some younger, without the whiskers."

Jim took the proffered hand and shook it, without warmth.

"The boy play poker, Billy?" Sam Nagle puffed, following Blue's lead. "We're gettin' up a little game. Maybe you two'd like to set in?"

Billy swallowed his surprise. "I reckon we would," he said. "All right with you, Jim?"

"Never refused a hand yet," Jim acquiesced.

The air turned blue in the corner of the *Lady Luck* where two tables had been shoved together. Smoke hung in a

thick pall, and little was said. At first Jim just managed to break even; then he got the hang of the various players' styles.

HE knew Billy's expressions like a book from the times they'd played during the long weeks while his arm mended. Sam Nagle turned out to have no more poker face than a pup. He almost whimpered while he watched his stacks dwindle, and the idiotic grin every time he held so much as a pair was a dead giveaway. The other two, whose names Jim didn't know, were only fair players, just so-so; their game went erratic when he began to rake in pot after pot. Only Blue was giving him a run for his money.

One of the two nondescript cowboys soon went broke. Blue offered to stake him another round. Jim waited while the jasper made up his mind, considering what he'd learned of Blue's game. Martin played his cards confident and easy; he never lost his temper; he never raised his voice. Finally, the cowboy stood up. "Naw, not this time, Blue. I'll go have me a drink with Mouse here."

A voice directly behind Jim purred, "Howdy, Wade," and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. All the more noticeable because of the friendly treatment the rest of the Bent Fork men were flinging his way, he felt the unmistakable menace in that voice. How long had Mouse been standing there?

"Howdy," he said, and went right on dealing, keeping his eyes on the cards.

It was not long before the other cowboy got out of the game, too. Sam, Blue, Billy and Jim continued to play.

Suddenly Blue laid his cards down. "I don't like that," he said coldly.

"Don't like what?" Billy Koller's jaw dropped open in surprise. Jim shoved his chair back a little way from the table.

"He knows what I mean," said Blue, cutting a sharp look at Jim. "Watch your step, hombre. All right now, who opens?"

The cold certainty settled down on Jim that Blue was leading him into a trap. Which way was it coming—and why? He picked up his cards. Blue slapped his own cards face up on the table—a pair of aces, a ten, and a pair of kings. His gun chopped across, butt-first, crunching against Jim's left wrist and scattering the three kings and a pair he held.

Fairly trapped! Jim kicked his chair over backwards, and grabbed for leather. "Good stackin', Blue!" he yelled.

"Like father, like son!" Blue thundered. The bull voice filled the room as he threw down. But the big man was too slow. Jim's .45 plucked the Colt neatly out of Blue Martin's hand and sent it flying across the room. He measured the distance to the doors with a lightning glance and suddenly encountered Mouse Parker's fixed stare, full of a sudden knowledge.

Everything stood still for a moment, Sam still clawing for his gun, Blue doubled with pain, Billy solid at Jim's side, when Mouse yelled, "Get him, Sam! That lobo's Silver Jim Rivers!"

Smokepoles blazed. Mouse dropped to one knee behind a table as his hat rose from his head and moved off as if it had wings. Jim's lips curled when he saw that, and he had time to get in another shot that creased Mouse's pointed ear, when a mountain landed on Jim's head from behind, and the *Lady Luck* blocked out.

JIM sat up painfully, rubbing the goose-egg on his aching head. A noisy rasping sound rose and fell repeatedly somewhere close by.

He felt for his guns, and shook his head woozily. The belt was gone. Naturally. He staggered over to the cell-door and peered down the short corridor, and across. A hombre lay sleeping on the narrow bunk in the cell across the way, size twelves splayed out at right angles. His snores made the neckerchief pulled over his face rise and flutter wildly at every breath.

"Jim!" He heard the piercing whisper, but he couldn't place it. "Up here! Pull your bucket over and stand on it!"

He placed the bucket noiselessly beneath the window and clambered up. Straining, he could see brown ringlets and a lace shawl.

She was looking away from the cell-window, scanning nervously up and down the street.

"Jim, it's Belle Hocking," she began, whipping around to find his face only a few inches from hers. "Oh!" She smiled ner-

vously. "I've been trying to wake you up for the longest!"

"What is it, Belle?" he whispered. "You're taking a big chance."

"You don't know how big! But it's important. Listen closely, I've only got a few minutes. I'm up here on a rain barrel, and if anybody comes along I'll have to jump. So—Enoch says you'll help me—"

"Enoch!" he burst out.

"Shhh! Yes. I know where he is, but I can't do anything about it. I'll take you to where he is, if you'll help me now."

"Of course, I'll help you, Belle, if I can. But—" Jim gestured at the little room around him.

She paid no attention to the implied objection. "It's something here in the jail, a paper they made me sign when they brought me in here to work for them. It's in a white envelope, sealed with red sealing wax, with the initials 'B.H.' on the outside. Sam has it in his strong-box, in the office. Over that way," she said, pointing to the far end of the corridor.

"But how can I get it for you, Belle? I'm in something of a tight myself." Jim felt stupefied. What did this girl think he could do?

"Is there a man in the other cell with a red neckerchief on?"

"Yeah. And big feet."

"That's him. Sam had to take him in because he shot up the general store and killed a little girl the other day when he was full of red-eye. He's one of Blue's men, and Blue wants him out. So Blue is staging a fake lynching party tonight just before dawn. It's three-thirty now; that's about one hour, or less. They'll come in masked, twenty of them. I think, and shoot up the jail. Then they'll take Barney away, supposedly to string him up in revenge for the little girl." She laughed scornfully. "As if Blue cared about that! But it's a good enough excuse for a fake jail-break."

"And you want me to try to get this paper for you during all the excitement, huh?"

"Yes. And then meet me with it. I'll go on out to Bill Koller's now, and if you bring me that paper, I'll keep my promise and take you to Enoch!"

"It's a deal!" Jim thrust two fingers through the close-set bars and encountered what felt like the lead-heavy haft of a knife.

"See if you can work that through the bars—it'll maybe help a little," she whispered, and was gone.

IV

JIM OCCUPIED himself with some hard thinking. Belle hadn't said anything about it, but Blue ought to be interested in the fact that Silver Jim Rivers was in the same calaboose with this Barney jasper. Of course, Blue hadn't put him there—he'd wanted to do the job a little more effectively! Was the big man so convinced Enoch had swindled the valley that he'd stack the cards to take out the valley's gripe on Enoch's son? Jim couldn't have expected to get out of the *Lady Luck* any other way than feet first, except that Mouse Parker had stuck his pointy nose into Blue's trap before it closed.

But what was Mouse Parker's game? Was he working against Blue Martin or with him? Most of all, Jim wanted to know how come the half pint had recognized him so far from the Arizona border. Was it barely possible that Mouse Parker was connected somehow with the Nogales gang?

Belle's part was plain enough up to a point. She was doing some kind of dirty work for somebody, but she didn't like it much. At the same time, she was friendly enough with Enoch to tell him Jim had blown into town, and to come to Jim for help in getting out from under.

He flipped the little knife idly. It thunked into the planks of the floor and quivered, standing on end. Sharp point, anyhow, and a paper-thin blade. A girl's weapon—like Marsha's whip. What good was a fancy little Mexican knife going to do him? He strongly suspected that Blue's fake lynching party had orders to throw some "accidental" shots in Jim's direction—and bullets cut deeper than knives! He smiled sardonically. Bent Fork was sure full of little surprises for the unsuspecting traveler!

The faint thunder of hoofs began to drift in on the still air. Jim waited. There was nothing else he could do. The thunder grew to an avalanche of sound. Half a

dozen bullets whanged in, good and high, and then a horde of shouting men poured up the steps into the ill-lit corridor. Jim pressed against the barred door of his cell, trying to make out identities, but he recognized none of the masked men.

Sam Nagle preceded them, with a knowing smile on his face. The key ring jingled in his hand. They hadn't even had to shoot their way in; the flabby-jowled little lawman was escorting them in like honored guests.

"What would you like, gentlemen?" puffed Sam.

"You know what we'd like!" one of the masked men shouted. "We want Barney Fields!"

"Well, sure," Sam said placatingly, "but we gotta do this right. You gotta threaten me, boys!"

Half a dozen men milled forward and shoved the smirking Sam toward Barney's cell. The corridor was jam-packed; men had to shuffle and give way as the door swung open. Barney looked to be injured. He limped painfully out, and two of the men sent to get him out grabbed his arms to support him.

Nobody looked in Jim's cell or spoke to him, although the backs of a couple of the "raiders" were pressed up against his bars.

They acted as if they didn't know he was there. He was too cagy to raise a ruckus and call attention to himself, but his puzzlement grew. The inaction galled his soul. He had to do something! He whipped off his neckerchief and wrapped it swiftly around the blade of the knife, hefted it a moment in his hand, and then brought the heavy silver handle down squarely on a flour-sacked head. The man sagged slightly, but there was no room for him to fall. Jim's hand shot out again through the bars, and fingers almost closed around the lyncher's dangling Colt.

Then the crowd surged, and the unconscious raider subsided gently, like butter on a hot day. He sprawled just out of Jim's reach.

Sam Nagle backed up the few feet across the corridor, as they cleared a way for Barney and his supporters. The masked men elbowed and shoved nervously. It was taking too long to maneuver Barney through the packed corridor. Someone shouted, "Give way there! Some of y' get outside!"

Meanwhile Belle's little knife, unwrapped now, flashed swift and quiet through braided leather strips. Jim cupped his hand under the key ring and it fell free of the leather thong on Sam's belt. The brief clink of metal was inaudible even to his ears, and he was listening for that. He almost gibbered. It was too easy! No lawman had a right to be that stupid!

THE corridor emptied, except for the unconscious raider sprawled on the floor, unnoticed. Barney stumped slowly along. He lifted his hand to the sheriff. "Happy days, Sam! The food coulda been better!"

"Ain't you forgettin' somethin', boys?" Sam called through the confusion. Several torches flared up as the men milled around outside. "How about this big bad outlaw here?" he sniggered.

"We ain't forgotten him. He'll get his, pronto and accidental!" There was a shout of laughter.

"Run for your life, sheriff!" someone bawled, and Sam strolled negligently down the steps into the darkened town.

Jim stood a moment, sheerly flabbergasted. The heavy key-ring swung from his fingers. He didn't understand one bit of this.

Then he heard a faint cracking, followed by a crash. A blazing pine-brand had fallen to the floor in front of him and the flimsy wooden ceiling opened a flame-rimmed circle to the fading stars. The acrid smell of burning was suddenly all through the prison, and another charred spot spread, farther along in the ceiling. Whiffs of smoke began to rise from the walls. They'd fired the whole building as they left, and done a thorough job!

Jim located two like keys, tried first one and then the other. He worked awkwardly but fast, twisting his long fingers through the bars. The door creaked open and moved, but only a few inches. Jim shoved and the sodden mound of flesh gave. He jumped over the unconscious raider, grabbed him by the boots and dragged him along behind, avoiding smouldering patches on the floor as several more sputtering brands ate their way through the roof.

They zigzagged hazardously down the corridor into the office. Muffled noises began to issue from the flour sack. Jim snatched the ranny's gun, gave him another clout over the head, and looked about for Sam's strong-box. There it was—flimsy as the jail. Taking careful aim, he shot off the lock with one bullet. When he tripped the hammer again, a click announced that the unconscious man had emptied his gun during the horseplay of breaking into the jail. Jim flung the useless weapon aside, and rooted through the papers in front of him.

White envelope . . . red sealing wax . . . initials—he swiped at his scorched eyebrows and shoved the paper into his shirt.

Jim heaved the raider's body over his good shoulder and got out of there. Just as he flung the unconscious man onto a nearby doorstep streamers of flame met over the top of the jail and converted it into a sure deathtrap, one minute too late.

Two or three sleepy men came piling out into the street. Bent Fork's prudent inhabitants must have locked their doors and shuttered their windows when the raiding party galloped past. Jim threw a quick look around. Sam Nagle was as prudent as anybody else in Bent Fork; he was nowhere in sight. Unarmed except for the little knife, Jim did not dare risk being seen, even by the sleep-dazed townsmen. He melted into a side street.

The silver gelding was patiently cropping grass, when Jim rounded the cottonwoods, breathing hard. He leaped into the saddle and slammed south along the trail, back-tracking to the rock-weighted mound of brush where he'd cached his border identity. Jim peeled his denim shirt and levis and stepped into the old black outfit. It felt good. He clapped the black Stetson onto his head, and buckled on his twin guns, with their chased silver mountings. The gelding pranced a little bit, lifting his hoofs, nervous and dainty.

The gelding picked a sure-footed way through the outlying fields and they completed a wide circle around Bent Fork. As Jim headed north again, back on the trail, Belle came riding out on Billy's little piebald mare to meet him.

Her eyes were dilated and she breathed hard. "I saw the blaze—figured you were either safe or dead. Did you get it?" she stabbed at him. "All right—let's go!" Her skirts whipped as she pulled the mare up, and swerved. They pounded off together, neck and neck.

Jim had questions that wouldn't wait. "Where's Billy?" he called across.

"In bed! Took a slug in his leg during the fight at the *Lady Luck*. It's just a flesh wound," she added. Then she flashed a smile across at Jim. "He's spitting like a wet cat 'cause he can't ride."

They neared Billy's cabin and passed beyond it in a flash, but Jim caught a glimpse of a gray-bearded face at the lit window. "Bring him home, boy, bring him home!" the big man shouted.

"I'll do my best," Jim answered under his breath. "Where *is* Enoch, anyhow?" he called to Belle.

"In a horseshoe-shaped draw up beyond the Big Fork. Chained. They've been torturing him for the money, but he won't tell. That's all that's saved his life, because Blue found the mine months ago."

"Blue!"

"Who else?"

"What about Mouse Parker?"

"I don't know his game," she admitted. "He and Blue are both playing a lone hand, spite of their hanging around together. Nobody but Blue and me and the guards know where Enoch and Bill Camp are, though. I had to take up their supplies. Mouse doesn't know where they are."

"He's about to!" Jim reined in suddenly. "Look yonder." Belle followed his pointing finger.

TEN or a dozen horsemen were round a hillock to the south. Their path would cut them in well ahead of Jim and Belle on the narrow trail. Jim had recognized the foremost rider, almost hidden behind the great white head of his horse. "Mouse Parker! An' he just caught sight of us!"

A ki-yi cut through the early morning air, and the Bent Fork men spurred their mounts to greater speed.

Jim grasped Belle by the shoulder. "Can we by-pass them to get to Enoch?"

"There's no other way but this," the girl gasped.

Jim thought fast. "You know the way to Blue's?"

"Sure—but I don't want to go there," the girl wailed.

"Take—me—there!" Jim pounded the words at her. "Enoch'll have to wait." She winced under his grasp, shrugged bitterly, and turned the piebald's head southeast.

The gap between the two and their pursuers had lessened, but it was still considerable, and increased with the change of direction. Jim and the girl crouched over their horses' necks and burned up the trail. For riding, they had the advantage of fewer numbers.

Jim had counted on its being late enough when they arrived for the hands to be up and out on the range, and it seemed he had guessed right. They clattered past the bunkhouse without being hailed and on up to the big sprawling ranch. Leaping down, Jim shoved open the unlocked door, and pulled Belle along with him into the living room.

Blue lived well, even luxuriously. A Chinese cook trembled in the inner doorway, clutching a frying pan to his breast. The rest of the house was as still as death. Then a rumbling shout roared down the shallow staircase. Blue Martin, wearing a nightshirt, burst out of a sleeping-room. There was a gun in his hand, at the ready.

"Who the hell — *Jim Wade!*" The drooping mustaches quivered, and the black eyes bulged. Blue reared back, his hands resting on the ornate bannister, his weapon forgotten.

"The same! Alive—an' shootin'!" Jim could hardly get the words out. "Dance, damn you!" The roar of Jim's gun echoed through the house and a picture fell from the far wall as bullets chewed up the boards around Blue Martin's great frame. He held his ground, the dark eyes glittering insanely. His face was strangely contorted.

"Your sins'll find you out, Belle Hocking," he thundered.

Belle tore loose from Jim's restraining arm and ran directly under the bannister. "Oh no they won't!" She ripped out the white envelope and waved it, a few feet under Blue's nose.

Jim held his fire. Blue leaned farther over the railing. "I have been working the vineyard of the Lord," he intoned. "I shall build him a silver altar! Let no man stand in my way!" The big man turned and stalked slowly back into his room. His bare feet made slapping noises on the boards.

"Why, he—he's crazy!" Belle said in a puzzled tone.

A shot blasted against the wall of the house. Jim fell into a crouch behind a big davenport and thrust Belle down beside him.

"Mouse!" he yelled. "Mouse Parker!"

There was no answer except that there were no further shots after the first one. Jim went on, "Hold your fire out there until I can speak my piece. It's one against ten, and I ain't shootin'. Come on in."

They were closer than Jim had thought. Men swarmed in, through doors and windows. They had left their horses, Jim realized, crawling in to encircle the ranch house. Suspiciously, they looked for him to show himself, ready to drop him.

Jim took a deep breath. He hoped they were none of them overly nervous on the trigger. He rose slowly from behind the davenport and looked directly into Mouse Parker's five-foot-high, unfathomable yellow stare as he went by.

"I said I had a piece to speak. I'll make it brief. Blue Martin ambushed Bill Camp and Enoch Wade on their way out of town." There were incredulous murmurs, but he ploughed on. "Enoch had had sense enough to hide the money, but Blue's men got him before he could cut back and pick it up in the night."

"He's not to be trusted with all that money!" came a dolorous shout from upstairs, sounding strangely hollow behind the locked door.

"Blue's been torturin' him—maybe both of them, I don't know."

"I have tried to assist them to be honest!" was the counterclaim.

"Blue scouted and found the mine right then, but he's playing a waiting game on that. He figgered after he made all his foreclosures an' such, he'd own the valley and own the claim both. That $10,000 in cash was holding him up a little bit. Belle Hocking, a girl he forced into this business but somebody he no longer has any hold over, is right here in this room and she'll back me up!"

He gave the girl his hand and she stood up, saying in a clear voice, "That's right, every word of it."

The hollow voice boomed from upstairs,

"Your sins'll—"

Jim went on hastily, "Blue Martin framed me in a poker game and tried his best to kill me. Now, since he made those loans to the valley people under false pretenses—and in my father's name, too—I aim to bust up Blue Martin's plans a little bit." Jim walked steadily over to the wall where the insecurely hung picture had fallen, leaving a dusty square. "Get me the key, Belle." The girl ran to the big desk, reached surely into a drawer and brought out a small key.

"How'd she know where that key was?" demanded one of the dumbfounded townsmen.

"What's under the bridge don't count," Jim said flatly. "Belle did what she was forced to, but nobody's forcing her any longer, and she's on the right side now." He flung open the door of the little safe and swept the contents out on the floor in one contemptuous gesture. "That'll square accounts a little!"

There was an agonized howl from upstairs. "You'll never get Enoch, Belle Hocking!" Blue shouted surprisingly. "He'll die first!" Bare feet slapped rapidly across the flooring above and crashing glass revealed that Blue had leaped out. There was a rush to the windows.

"There he goes!" Mouse shouted.

Belle leaned all the way out the window, screaming, "You jealous old coot! Don't you dare do anything to him!" she hurled at the flapping nightshirt.

But Blue out-yelled them all as he ran. "Barney! *Kill Enoch Wade!*"

Jim saw a man hobble out of the deserted-looking bunkhouse. Barney Fields! The crippled man somehow scrabbled into his saddle, and rode off at a gallop. There was immediate confusion in every direction. Then Mouse snapped to his men, "You two catch that old lunatic and take him in town—the rest, come on!"

Belle pounded desperately behind Jim as he raced, angling across the ground. "Blue's that way," she gasped. "Where we goin'?"

"Stable—fresh horses!" Jim snapped over his shoulder.

He leaped to the broad back of Blue's proud roan stallion. Belle was close behind him on a big black as they racketed out after the flying Barney Fields.

THE ragged group of riders behind them bunched and then strung out, the Bent Fork men urging their lathered mounts to impossible speed. Jim cast a glance behind. Mouse Parker must have taken time to get a fresh mount too. He was slowly pulling up to them where they rode in the lead. The three pounded steadily along while the main body of riders fell quickly behind and were lost in the distance.

There was movement off to the west, and Jim swore. What else could go wrong? Then a white-crowned rider appeared, speeding to intercept them. "Marsha!" Jim cried as the pinto cut into the trail.

"What's—excitement—you—all right?" he caught some of her words on the wind.

"Ridin' to Enoch and Bill! Drop back, girl, where you'll be safe!"

He didn't hear her answer to his urgent command, but she gave no ground, and he admired her gameness even while he swore at it.

Barney Fields somehow managed to keep distance between himself and his pursuers, until they reached the sandstone country. There his horse stumbled, and Jim forged ahead within range while the cripple fought for control of his pain-crazed mount.

Three shots missed their mark. Barney twisted in the saddle and let loose a wild one. A sudden fusillade poured in from the right, and Jim dimly heard Belle shouting, "In the draw there, Jim—the horseshoe draw!"

"Keep back!" he shouted, snapping another bullet at Barney Fields. The cripple abruptly pitched over his horse's neck, rolled and lay still, carrying his message of death for Enoch to hell with him.

As the two men wheeled and galloped into the draw Mouse was so close to Jim he could have reached out and touched the little man. They raked their horses' sides, roweling them cruelly. Jim spotted one of the guards behind a great boulder just at the mouth of the draw. He got a bead on the man and fired, just as another burst of shots sounded behind him, on the other side of the canyon mouth. The roan stallion suddenly pitched and fell, but Jim managed to jump clear. He knelt behind the great inert body, aiming at his man again. He poured lead into the outlaw, and saw him slump sidewise, clutching at

his belly.

Mouse had swung around almost on the center line of the draw; he dropped his man as Jim turned. "Come on in, Rivers," Mouse called. He cantered toward the far wall of the barren clearing on his untouched white horse, while Jim stumbled on into the draw on foot. He found there was blood running down his leg, but he felt no pain through the numbness. He heard the cautious approach of the two girls beyond the narrow, rocky mouth of the draw and called to them.

A boy chained to the granite wall had managed to get to his knees in spite of the short chains that prevented him from rising any further. Beside him, a white-haired man lay still and quiet in his shackles. The kid must be Marsha's brother.

"I think a stray slug got Enoch," the boy called miserably as they approached. "He was right in your man's line of fire," he told Mouse.

Marsha rounded the turn and stopped short at the tableau. Then she rushed to the boy and flung herself into his arms, laughing and crying at the same time.

Belle knelt to cradle the older man's head. The tears gushed as she looked up pitifully and said, "He was going to take me out of all that mess! He was going to take me up to the lumbering country! We —we were going to be married!"

"Sure we will, Belle," the white-haired man said feebly. "Howdy, Jim. I knew you'd—get here if any—body could. Now don't take on—like that, Belle," he muttered testily, trying to raise one hand to the weeping face above him. "Never could —stand—to see a woman bawl. We'll leave Bill here—to show the folks where their money—an' their mine—is, and we'll slip off north and make—" the old voice was weakening rapidly. Enoch spat blood. "—make our fortunes," he whispered.

Blood gushed from his throat, and the white head fell back, suddenly, unmistakably.

"He's gone," Belle moaned. "He's gone, and I loved him so!"

JIM straightened at last from where he knelt by his father's side. He put a hand awkwardly on Belle's shoulder. Marsha was comforting the girl.

Jim walked a little distance away, holding the black Stetson in his two hands, which seemed suddenly to have become useless things. Mouse fell in beside him. "I come down here to straighten out the mine business," he said musingly. "When no further word come into Carson City after a strike that rich, they got suspicious and sent me down. I reckon that's all straightened out now, thanks to you." Jim hardly heard the words. Mouse went on, more briskly.

"We have a little unfinished business of our own, though, Silver Jim Rivers! You're wanted in Arizona. As a marshal of the state of Nevada, I hereby place you under arrest."

"All right," said Jim listlessly. Mouse stared his surprise, his hand falling away from his gun-butt.

"It took a long time an' a lot of shootin' to do what was wanted of me in Arizona. By the time I finished my particular assignment, I was too well-known. I had a lobo reputation bigger than I wanted to buck. So I skinned out for the north. It didn't make me no never mind where I might be. No family down there, or anythin' like that." He sighed deeply.

"But if you'll wire the sheriff of Amante Township, Mouse, you'll find out I'm in the clear when you get your answer at Carson City. The sheriff deputized me to ride with that outfit as Silver Jim Rivers, but it was all legal enough. . . . You wire the sheriff; I'll go along with you peaceable till you get the answer." He held out his hands for the handcuffs, but Mouse was quite satisfied.

"The law gets you in funny company sometimes, don't it?" Mouse said. "Well, I never got more pleasure out of not makin' an arrest, Jim Wade, an' I'll shake on that." They walked in silence for a moment. "I was always a trouble-hound myself. With my looks, I couldn't go in for women, an' the law just kinda crept up on me!" He laughed, and then swung around to face Jim. "You wanta go to Carson City with me, anyhow? There's jobs waitin' for people like you."

Jim stood still a moment. Then he said, "No. No, thanks." His glance shot straight as an arrow to Marsha Camp. "I got somebody to come home to now, I reckon."

A Marshal's Mask

By Richard Brister

Pride hung on the law-dog's frail, old frame like an oversized mantle. Was it thick enough to withstand the taunts of those who said his gun-handy days had long since flown?

UNCLE BILLY SOUTHWORTH pushed through the batwings of the Southworth Saloon. He nodded with ancient dignity to acquaintances at the poker table, then moved creakily toward his accustomed spot at the end of the bar.

He lifted a gnarled hand in greeting to the bald bartender, and said in a cracked voice, "Shot o' poison fer an old prairie rat, Lefty. Seems like I take a lot o' killin'."

Uncle Billy staggered a little on his long rickety legs. His heavy-lidded eyes were bloodshot. His white beard and mustache needed trimming. Even the marshal's badge which hung so proudly upon his tattered calfskin vest looked tarnished and old, suggesting that the authority it had once represented was a thing of the long-ago past.

The bartender smiled indulgently, but his voice was guarded.

"Sure you ain't had enough, Uncle Billy? You ain't as young as you once was, an'—"

Uncle Billy stared the man down with all the dignity of more than eighty-five years. Nobody knew how old he actually was—including Uncle Billy himself—for Uncle Billy's mind was not all it might be these last thirty years, and he had long since quit counting birthdays.

"You tryin' t'tell me what's good fer me, Lefty?"

"Well...no..." started the barman.

"Ain't I the feller that founded this town?" the oldster demanded angrily. "Ain't I wore the Marshal's badge for longer than you even been livin'? Ain't this here saloon named after old Uncle Billy? An' that street outside there?"

"That's right, Uncle Billy," put in the bartender, looking harried. "That's right. You cleaned the town out when it wasn't no more than a prairie junction. You brought the law, and kept it here to stay, an' now the town's named after you. An' you went up to the Lost Gold Cave and brought out the Smedley brother single-handed."

Uncle Billy smiled. "They wasn't nothing. They was easy as duckpins, once I got in shootin' range of 'em. Shakin' like jelly, they was. Scairt silly becuz of my reputation. But you take Bart Hodgson. There was a real killer for you, by—"

Uncle Billy had to stop, because just then Lefty was called down the bar to take care of a customer. When Lefty returned he did not seem to take much interest in what Uncle Billy had to tell him.

"Why," he said uncomfortably, "I tell you, Uncle Bill: I believe you already told me about that one."

Uncle Billy paused just for a moment, then went on, "Well, then, you take the showdown gun-fight I fit with Jeb Raskey." He waved toward the street. "Right outside o' them very batwings, I met Jeb Raskey. Wust owlhootin' sidewinder we had in these parts. I give him fust chance t' draw, then—"

"Look," said Lefty, "I reckon I heard that one too, Uncle Billy." Lefty wiped his bald head with his hand. It was warm, for June, and he'd been busy all night. There just wasn't time to hear Uncle Billy's stories again, not this Saturday night. Sometimes Lefty wondered if folks in Southworth had done right, that long-ago day when Uncle Billy had gone up to the Lost Gold Cave and brought out the Smedleys, in the way they'd kidded Uncle Billy along.

Uncle Billy Southworth had gone up there a fine big man in his prime, a tough, hell-for-leather lawman whose singing guns had saved the town for the law-abiding. But somehow in that gory, gun-blasting fight at that cave, Marshal Southworth's mind had snapped loose from its moorings. He'd come down dragging his

"Got him. Got him," gasped Uncle Billy proudly.

prisoners by the scruffs of their necks, a wild look about him, to hear old timers tell it, and babbling like a baby.

It was not actual insanity. There was nothing dangerous about what had happened to the marshal. It was just that the iron seemed to have dropped completely out of Bill Southworth's system, in that final fray. Where his guns had once done most of his talking, his tongue now almost incessantly babbled. Where he had been stern, unyielding, in his human relations, he became gentle and kind. Children loved him, and all grown folks smiled in the warmth of his presence.

They named the town Southworth to please him. The saloon he frequented changed its name. The main street of the town became Southworth Street.

And what was more, because western folk have such a long streak of sentiment in them, they had continued to elect Uncle Billy, all these long years, to the marshal's job he had performed so well in the past.

Of course, it was the town's secret that Ben Devlin, the stocky, red-faced deputy, was the real law in Southworth. The townsfolk chipped in every year to provide a fund which would pay Ben a full marshal's wage. But folks never ceased to smile at the sight of Uncle Billy striding down Southworth Street, with Ben trailing respectfully one step behind him.

Ben let the old man order him around, when it didn't matter, and that puffed Uncle Billy up a good bit. But when a real shooting fracas loomed, something that might be dangerous for Uncle Billy, Ben

tactfully suggested some job for the older man which would not put him in the path of any stray bullets. He always managed to convince the old man it was an important job, too.

Folks weren't sure whether they admired Ben Devlin more for the clever way he soothed Uncle Billy's pride, at such risky times, or for the efficient, tough way he manhandled law breakers.

Now, leaning against the bar in the Southworth Saloon, Uncle Billy felt a mite huffy at the casual way Lefty was treating him. He said slowly, his pale eyes blinking, "Well, since you're too dang busy t' listen to me, an' mebbe learn somethin', how about that there drink I ordered?"

The barman sighed, and sent a helpless glance toward the poker players, who had turned in their chairs and were watching the scene with indulgent good humor.

"You act like you had a good deal a'ready," said the bartender, sighing. "You gotta keep yourself in shape, Uncle Billy. I hear them Pittley twins may be headin' this way. Them fellers is real nasty hombres...killers, from all I hear tell of 'em. Folks here in town are countin' on you fer protection against 'em."

Uncle Billy's thin chest swelled out, and he stroked his drooping mustache with gnarled, shaking fingers. Pride hung on his frail old frame like a mantle, and instinctively, his hands went down to fondle the butts of the two heavy sixguns he kept constantly strapped around his thin waist.

"Well, now," he drawled happily, "there jest might be somethin' in what you say, Lefty. I hear tell they're right crusty devils. Nothin' like some of the bad 'uns I come up against in the old days, o' course. But right crusty. Shore would admire t' cross trails with them fellers, by golly!"

"And I'd sure admire to see it, Uncle Billy," Lefty lied.

The Pittley twins had pillaged their way through three states in the past six months leaving behind death and terror. They had robbed seventeen banks, held up three trains, and uncounted numbers of stages. They were the biggest, and ugliest, blot on the national record since the days of Billy The Kid and the James brothers.

Uncle Billy had taken a lively interest in the Pittleys since they'd first begun making reward handbills and plastering the countryside with pictures of the twin desperadoes. After a few drinks Uncle Billy liked to amuse his friends with bloody accounts of what he'd do to the twins if ever he so much as laid eyes on them.

Now he said grimly, "Yep, you're right, Lefty. Heared tell from a drummer down to the Southworth House jest this afternoon that they might be aheadin' out this way. Montana's got a mite too hot fer 'em. They've gotta hole up somewheres fer a spell, I reckon. An' this here country's plumb covered with hole-out places."

"That's right, Uncle Billy," said Lefty, glad that the talk had veered away from the subject of that drink the old timer had wanted.

"Gunna pass up thet drink," the old man stated firmly, fondling the badge on his vest. He moved with tipsy dignity toward the batwings. Outside, he loosened his ancient Colts in the brown leather holsters and walked down the boards toward the marshal's office.

UNCLE Billy turned into the jailhouse, and found stocky, red-faced Ben Devlin comfortably ensconced behind his own desk, with his bootheels resting casually atop it, while he pursued the weekly edition of the *Southworth Sentinel*. Ben was a pleasant, decent enough sort, Uncle Billy supposed, but the big man was soft by old-fashioned standards of what made a good lawman. Uncle Billy gave him a stern glare, and Ben got up out of Uncle Billy's swivel chair with apologetic haste.

"Sorry, Marshall," he said humbly. "I jest keep forgettin' a deputy ain't got no right t' sit in the marshal's chair. Set yourself, and rest up some, why don't you?"

"Don't need no rest, Ben. Ain't done a lick of what you could call real work in a month of Sundays. This town's plumb dead. Now, in the old days—"

"May not be dead fer too long," Ben said worriedly, and waved his open newspaper. "Says here them Pittley twins was headin' out this away, the last time they was seen. Sooner or later, I figger you an' me're gonna have trouble with them two murderin' devils."

"Can't be too soon to suit me!" humphed Uncle Billy. "I could do with a bit o'

gun work. These here shootin' irons o' mine're gettin' plumb rusty." He tapped them, and looked significantly toward Ben Devlin. "Them Pitleys ain't nothin'. When I went up to the Cave to bring out the Smedleys, I took on a real job, I can tell you. Why—"

"Hold it a minute, Uncle Bill." Ben was peering out the window. "What's John Tobb so tarnation jiggered up about, you reckon? Looks like his house jest burnt down or somethin'. He's headed this way."

Uncle Billy went over to watch the nester coming. John Tobb had a small dirt farm out by the old Lost Gold Cave. He was a quiet, hard-working sort, with a wife and three small children he doted on. It hurt Uncle Billy to see the man acting so het up like. The minute John came crashing into the office, Uncle Billy said to him, "What is it, John? Now, jest try t' calm down a mite, an' tell us—"

But the excited farmer was already telling his story, in a rushing babble of words, and instead of talking to Uncle Billy, he addressed Ben Devlin. Uncle Billy figured that was in pretty bad taste on John's part, but he could excuse the man, since John acted so excited.

John Tobb was saying: "It's Johnny, Ben. My youngest. There's some owl-hooters hid out in the Cave, an' they're holdin' Johnny in there for a hostage. I figger it's them Pittleys, like as not...and ...and they'll kill him, John. They'll kill my younker!"

Uncle Billy went over and laid a soothing hand on the farmer's shoulder. "Now, calm yourself, John." He leaned forward, excited himself, though he tried not to show it. "What—what makes y' think it's them Pittleys?"

"There was smoke driftin' out of there last week," said the distraught father. "I seen it right off, but didn't pay much mind, figgerin' it was just some kids foolin' around in there, or maybe jest a heavy dew, that looked like smoke. I forgot all about it. Then, yesterday, Johnny and Hank went up in there, explorin', without me knowin'..." His voice broke off, his lower lip trembled, and Uncle Billy said gently,

"Go on, John."

"H-Hank come back cryin', late fer supper. They was two fellers hid out in the cave, he said, fellers that looked jest alike, which makes me suspect it's them Pittley twins. One of 'em was wounded bad in the leg. Gun shot, Hank figgered it was."

Uncle Bilily nodded grimly. "That's them, all right. That's how come we ain't heard nothin' about 'em, the last couple days. Had to hole up, they did, 'cuz they couldn't travel. Go on, John."

"THEY sent Hank on down to the house to fetch food up to 'em. They kept my Johnny up there with 'em. They promised if I'd send the food up, they'd leave Johnny go. I kept my side o' the bargain, but they wa'n't as good as their promise. They're still holdin' Johnny up there in the cave. They told Hank to tell me, the second time he come down, after takin' the food up, that if I mentioned anything about this to anyone else, they'd kill Johnny. Ben. . .Ben. . . d'ya think they'd do it? I—I held out all night, afore comin' t' tell ya. . .but when I looked up there at that cave this mornin', it looked might quiet. Mebbee. . .mebbe they've kilt the pore kid a'ready."

"Now, shush," said Uncle Billy. "Shush up, John, an' let's think a minute. This here's a tough one. Puts me in mind of the time them Smedleys was holed out in that same dang-blasted cave, an' I—"

"Perhaps," Ben Devlin said gently, "this ain't no proper time for reminiscin', Marshal." He looked at John Tobb. "I'm right sorry you held out this long, John. You should've told us about it sooner. We'll do what we can, but. . .well, I reckon the only thing is t' round up a posse, go out there full strength, and try to talk some sense into that pair of locoed sidewinders."

Uncle Billy stared at the deputy, gasping. "Why—why, you gone crazy?" he spluttered. "You heard what John jest told you, Ben. They mean t' kill Johnny, once they figger John's spilled the beans for them. We don't dast go anywhere near that place with a posse!"

Ben shrugged tiredly and asked in a grave tone. "What else can we do? We can't save the younker by sittin' here in town doin' nothin', can we?" His normally gentle voice was a trifle impatient. "This is a time for action, Marshal. Not talkin'!"

Uncle Billy could feel cold sweat forming on the backs of his gnarled

hands. He knew Johnny Tobb. As nice a freckle-faced, tow-headed younker as a man could want for his own son. Uncle Billy had often given the boy sticks of candy, and told him stories, on the infrequent occasions when the elder Tobb brought the whole family in to town for the Saturday shopping.

What Ben Deviln suggested was sure death for the youngster. Uncle Billy knew that quite surely. He had had plenty of experience with men like the Pittleys. When they said they'd kill a hostage, they weren't fooling.

Uncle Billy racked his brain for some other way to approach such a ticklish situation.

"Well," Ben Devlin said, none too gently, for he was distraught, in an ugly state of nervous ill humor, "you got any better suggestion, Marshal?"

Uncle Billy had to admit he didn't. But he said, "Ben. . .you jest can't take a posse out there. Them fellers are desperate, or they'd never've holed up in the Cave t' begin with. They'll kill Johnny Tobb, sure as shootin', jest t' prove they mean business. They know it's the hangnoose for 'em, once the law lays a hand on 'em."

"There's no use talking about it," Ben said tightly. "We can't do anything to help the younker by standin' here gabbin', an' that's for certain." He hesitated, then faced Uncle Billy squarely. "Marshal, I know you're wearin' the badge, an' I'm s-posed t' be takin' your orders. That's well an good, most times. But this here's a real crisis. You're a mite old for this kind of a do. . .and. . .well, I figger it might be best if I was to take over the reins, jest for this one shebang."

Uncle Billy stared at him, gasping. "'Y—Y' mean—you wanta run the whole party?"

"That's right," Ben Devlin said, without even blinking.

Uncle Billy straightened up to his full six feet, and stood on his rights.

"Nothin' doin'," he said coldly. "Long as I'm wearin' the badge, I reckon I know my rightful duty. I ain't so tarnation old I can't live up to my office, Ben Devlin. Folks hereabouts must figger the same way, or they wouldn't keep electin' me."

Ben shot a helpless look at John Tobb. The farmer shrugged miserably. He was unable to bring all his thoughts to the present.

Ben said, "Now, look, Uncle Billy . . . thar's a life at stake. John's boy . . . an' I'm not going to let you—"

"You!" Uncle Billy exploded, his mustache quivering in the height of his passion. "You're not going to let *me!* Ain't you gettin' a mite big fer yer britches, young feller? If I figgered you had any idee how to go about this thing, I'd step down to you without no hesitation. Fact is: I figger ye'll botch it, an' mebbee we'll lose Johnny Tobb. I don't mean to fool with you no more, Ben. You been actin' kind of uppity some time now. Don't think I don't notice them things. I'd've fired you, if I didn't figger y' needed the money the deputy job pays you. Now, jest you pull in yore hackles, an' *I'll* give the orders!"

There was a long, pregnant silence, during which the two glared at each other. Ben Devlin heaved a weary sigh. "Didn't figger you'd ever have to know this, Uncle Bill. But carryin' on the town's masquerade ain't wuth the life of John's boy, I don't reckon."

"Masquerade?" Uncle Billy glared at him. "Speak out, man. Don't talk in riddles. Say what you're thinkin'!"

"I'm thinkin'," Ben said slowly, heavily, "it's time you found out you ain't really marshal. You're jest a—"

"Not—really—marshal?" Uncle Billy gulped. It was as if he had suddenly caught a slug in the pit of his stomach.

"That's right," Ben said with evident misery. "You're jest the figurehead marshal, Uncle Billy. Have been for years. I don't like havin' t' tell you this, no more'n you're pleased t' hear it, but. . ." He sighed, then went on to tell the whole story. ". . .so, I reckon now you know where you stand, Uncle Billy," he finished unhappily. "And . . . well . . . I'm givin' the orders."

Uncle Billy couldn't look at him. How many times he had chased this big kindly man out of the marshal's chair, he was thinking. Ben's rightful chair. He remembered how Ben always used to watch his tongue toward Uncle Billy, used to walk behind him a step or two, out of pseudo-respect, when they walked down Southworth together. And now, it evolved that

all that was a sham. These past thirty odd years. He'd been marshal only in name, a hollow shell of a lawman, an empty barrel sounding off loudly to the folks of the town, who had patiently listened, out of deference to the man he had once been.

But they had been laughing at him! He knew that now. Laughing at him. Bill Southworth, the two-fisted lawman who in other years had built this town with his own bare hands so that they could enjoy the fruits of his labors! He felt hot shame ride through him, painting his weathered cheeks crimson.

His thin shoulders sagged limply, and he stared at the floor.

"Reckon I'm just an old fool, Ben," he said disgustedly, "an' that's the truth of it. I—I'm right sorry, about forcin' your hand thataway. I know how much you hated havin' t' tell me. You're a good boy, Ben. You go at this thing your own way. Me—" he shrugged tiredly "—I'm jest an old man, fit t' set in the sun an' blab about what great shakes I used t' be in the past." His voice cracked, on a high falsetto. "I—I won't give y' no more trouble." He pulled the marshal's badge off his vest, laid it on the desk. "That's your'n, I reckon." He turnedd to go.

"Wait, Uncle Bill!" Ben Devlin said anxiously. "I—I—"

Uncle Billy turned dejectedly in the doorway. "What's on your mind, Ben?"

"I—I'll need all the help I can get, Uncle Billy. You—you're an old hand at things like this, an'—an' I'll admit you've got a keen head on your shoulders, for dealin' with fellers like these here Pittleys. I—uh—I wish you'd stick along with—with the posse, to sort of—advise me, in case I—"

"Thanks, Ben," broke in Uncle Billy. He knew Ben Devlin. The big stocky man with the kind red face was going 'way out of his way, Uncle Billy thought limply, to spare his feelings. Ben didn't really want his advice any more than he wanted the man in the moon to advise him. "I—I reckon I'll just go up to the South—" he winced, realizing how the names in this town were going to mock him, from now on "—to the saloon," he corrected hastily, "an' git full o' red-eye."

Once out on the board walk, he added to himself, disgustedly, "Reckon that about all I'm good fer."

When he finally thrust through the saloon's batwings, he saw in one quick glance that the news of Johnny Tobb and the Pittley brothers had preceded him. He read the awkwardness behind the men's uncomfortable eyes, as they turned to look at him. They knew. Uncle Billy turned abruptly away. He stood wrapped in brooding thought for a moment. Then suddenly he walked stiff-legged to the hitching rail in front of the saloon, picked out the best looking horse he could find, swung himself stiffly into the western saddle, and rode wildly down Southworth Street.

It was a half-hour's hard ride to the Lost Gold Cave, but Uncle Billy made it just a shade under that time. He was panting hoarsely when he swung down off the tall,sweat-lathered black, and stared up the side of the pine-dotted mountain toward where the gaping cave entrance beckoned.

His joints creaked noisily, and his legs felt weary. He was bone tired, but somehow he felt exhilarated. Let Ben Devlin fool around back in town organizing his blasted posse. In the old days, when trouble came, Battling Bill Southworth had always believed in jumping right into the fracas, trying to surprise the other man, beat him to the punch with the most hot lead where it was going to do the most good.

He wasn't going to be so tarnation foolish as to walk right up there into that cave and get a hide full of lead, but he might be able to do something constructive. The main idea, the way Uncle Bill had it figured, was action. Don't stand idle. Do something.

Uncle Billy tethered his horse. He then got down on all fours and crept cautiously up through brush, briar, and gravelly rubble, toward the cave mouth. Dusk was coming slowly. He made the most of the thickening shadows, and took proper advantage of every bit of natural cover that offered.

It was funny, in a way. Years before, he had crawled just like this, up this very same terrain, toward that identical cave mouth. Then he had been a strong big man in his fighting prime. Now he was old and decrepit. But somehow, in the last

few moments, he had recaptured the spirit he had when he attacked the Smedley's.

He thought again of small, tow-headed Johnny Tobb, and wriggled forward more swiftly, snake-like. If those murdering devils had laid a hand on that little tyke's body! . . . He swore, violently, the way he had in the old days.

He lifted his head cautiously around a big boulder. The cave mouth was about twenty yards away. He suddenly caught his breath, seeing the figure of a man sitting idly against one wall, his legs stretched across the entrance, a long Colt revolver on his lap. The man was young, with a hard, stubbly face. A mean look to him. He had a twig in his left hand. His right hand held a long-bladed knife. He was whittling.

Funny, thought Uncle Billy. Lee Smedley had been sitting just like that, thirty-odd years agone, when young Bill Southworth had suddenly rared up from behind this self-same stone ,and bellowed a challenge.

True, Lee hadn't been whittling. He'd been snoozing. But the effect was the same, Uncle Billy reasoned. Both men had stood a lax watch at the cave mouth, both preoccupied, and the challenge could hardly help but surprise this young Pittley devil, much as it had surprized Lee Smedley.

Uncle Billy smiled, remembering how it had been with Lee Smedley. Young Bill Southworth was too much of a gun proud lawman to shoot a man like a sitting duck, but not so proud he'd miss a chance to throw a scare into an enemy when the opportunity offered.

He'd rared up like a lion, roared just as loud. Lee'd grabbed the gun off his lap and blazed away at him like lightning. Bill Southworth had taken that slug in the hip. It had knocked him down. But even while falling, he had punched out the shot which caught Lee Smedley square between the eyes.

Then Frank Smedley had come arunning. He'd slammed a dead-eye shot into Marshal Bill's stomach. Then Frank had found cover behind a big rock, to one side of the cave mouth, and from there he had punched three more murderous slugs into Southworth's helpless body, before one of the posse, shooting with a rifle from way down at the foot of the hill, had scored a lucky hit on Frank, and had killed him.

"Well, now,' mused Uncle Billy, "human nature don't change a whole heap down the years, I don't reckon. These two fellers is gun-slicks jest like them Smedleys. Holed out the same way, jest like them others. Guard even sits in the self-same position. Reckon if I was to rare up an' call that young feller, it'd all go purty muchlike it did that other time. 'Cept, o' course, there ain't no posse t' help me out this time. An'—" he made a wry face "—I could be jest a mite slower with my shootin' irons."

WELL, he knew one thing for certain. The posse was out. He didn't want any part of them, this time. Not while young Johnny Tobb was a helpless hostage inside there. No posse could hope to hide itself from that guard, for long. And to judge from the mean face of that man on guard, these Pittley's would make good their promise to do that boy in, if the father brought the law down on them.

It was, all in all, a mean situation, thought Uncle Billy grimly. The only hope was to surprise them both out of that cave, and with a couple of well-placed lead slugs, to keep them outside, permanent-like.

It was going to be a chancy thing. He might well fail, but what did it matter? All he knew was that he had to act now, before Ben Devlin came busting downtrail and messed up things completely.

It was queer, lying there, thinking out his next move, as he had so long ago. Then his heart had beat wildly, fiercely, but now his excitement was of a cooler temper. It was like play-acting, he thought, something he had gone through before, and now made easier for him.

He pulled a deep breath into his shrivelled lungs, reared up on his hind legs with a throaty yip and a bellow.

"Y'asked for this, Pittley!"

The outlaw was startled. He moved like a snake. The whittling was flicked aside. He grabbed the gun and brought it up fast. Uncle Billy triggered just as that gun came up at him. He saw a small round hole appear as if by magic in the outlaw's forehead. The man sagged limp.

Uncle Billy stood there on wide-spread legs, grinning, growling like an old grizzly bear. He was banking hard on human

nature now, and he watched that cave mouth hard.

The second Pittley twin suddenly loomed in the cave mouth, gun in hand.

He blinked, trying to accustom his eyes to the daylight. Then he spied Uncle Billy. He glanced down at his dead brother, swore, and slammed a shot at Uncle Billy.

"Right," Uncle Billy thought, "on schedule." And so saying, he twisted his gaunt frame sideward. He could feel the slug growl angrily through his outer coat and vest, feel the hot burn against his ribs.

He took careful aim, not at the man who had just shot him, but at a point halfway between that man's position and that protecting stone which bordered one side of the cave's entrance. His aged hand trembled but there was, he figured, enough steadiness left to him for one decent shot. He watched his man during that electric split second, and thought grimly, "Come along now, behind that rock, friend. That's what Frank Smedley thought of next, son. An' I'm jest waitin' fer ya."

There was a second orange flash from the man in the cave mouth. Uncle Billy felt a hot poker jam its way through his chest.

He crumpled weakly into the grass, gasping, feeling his strength drain away swiftly. *Blast him!* he thought weirdly. *Blast him! He sure enough crossed me.*

He tightened his gnarled fingers around the butt of his gun, blinked tears from his watering eyes, and struggled to hold his head on that bit of space the man must pass through, if and when, he followed the lead of Frank Smedley, and sought cover in back of that convenient stone. If the slick devil just stood up there, big as a house, and kept blasting away at Uncle Billy, it would be just too bad. . .too bad for young Johnny Tobb, Uncle Billy thought frantically.

All this was only a matter of seconds. He saw his man suddenly make a lunging dive for the stone. He gripped his gun harder, pulled trigger, holding the bead, and the slug slammed out of his smoking gun muzzle just as the desperado passed through the target Uncle Billy had so carefully marked out. He saw the man's body go lax in mid-flight, and topple grotesquely, a twitching rag of bones and skin, atop the stone which the fellow had sought for cover.

Uncle Billy breathed deep. "Got him! Got him!" He pulled trigger again, punched out another slug. And another. And another. . . . He'd show the danged rascals. Teach 'em to fool with Marshal Southworth.

He was still trying to pull that stiff trigger, with bloodless, water-weak fingers, when the posse came thundering up the hillside.

"There," he croaked out weakly, "there's yer Pittley twins. Y' can cart 'em to Boot Hill."

But Ben Devlin's eyes were streaming with unabashed tears, especially after he saw a wide-eyed Johnny Tobb coming out of the cave, with rope welts on his wrists and ankles, and he refused to look at the dead outlaws. He stayed close to Uncle Billy.

"You—you ain't hurt bad, are you, Uncle Billy? You—you'll live through this one, won't you?"

"Why, shucks, boy," said Uncle Billy, "in the old days, I've ate more lead than this fer my breakfast. I'm too plumb crusty t' die with my boots on." The dejection of an hour past had completely left him. Hurt pride was gone, as well as certain foolish illusions. He said, "Reckon I'm a mite too old for marshallin' though. I'm gunna retire complete, Ben. Reward money for stashin' them Pittleyll's see me through, I reckon." He looked up at Ben with all the old fire, and said sternly, "I told you there wa'n't no need of a posse."

"Sure did," Ben said contritely. "An' proved it!"

"'T wa'n't nothin' to it," said Uncle Billy. "Just like them Smedleys. Why, I mind the day I come up here agunnin' fer them Smedleys. I rared up from behind that there rock, ki-yi-in' an' whoopin' at Lee. He was settin' right there in the cave mouth, see?"

Uncle Billy rattled on while the posse gathered closer, the better to hear him.

'Twas a conscience-bitten herd of townsfolk that marched to Billy Southworth's funeral that same week . . . but there was nary a body who wouldn't have gladly changed South Dakota to read SOUTHWORTH.

Lady Wyoming-Gun Poison!

By Dee Linford

The deputy sheriff stood a fair chance matching Colts with Cohill's badge-blasters . . . but he was inviting an early preacher-party in tackling that Timberlake girl, the six-gun avenger of the line-fence patrol.

ACTING SHERIFF ERNIE MATtern was readying a cell in the county jail for a new tenant when Milt Timberlake wheeled his ponderous hulk into the front office and promptly pre-empted the Sheriff's chair.

Timberlake was big as an Angus bull. He had to turn sideways to get through a door, and he hadn't straddled a horse in ten years. His breath was too short for his tremendous body, and he filled Mattern's low-backed wicker chair until the armrests bulged.

His protruding brown eyes looked worried and half angered. He came straight to the business that had brought him there.

"Ernie, what's this about you swearing a murder warrant for Logan Cohill?"

Mary lowered her rifle as the boastful riders swung away.

Ernie Mattern was in no mood to discuss the business of his office with outsiders. But Milt Timberlake was Henrietta's most substantial businessman, and his opinions on local problems carried more weight than his own swollen ankles. He was also chairman of the board of county commissioners which had appointed Mattern to his job, and father of the girl Ernie intended to marry within a month. So Ernie bridled his impatience and made his reply civil.

"Why nothing's about it, Milt. Except it's what I've done."

As he spoke, he pulled the paper in question from his pocket and dropped it on the desk top. Timberlake spread it, and read it through, his loose lips moving soundlessly. When he'd finished, he grunted and brushed the paper to the floor.

"You've gone crazy, Ernie!" His voice was ridiculously small for his size.

Mattern did not reply. He bent to pick up the warrant. Very deliberately, he shook the dust from it, folded it, and placed it in his pocket.

Two spots appeared on Ernie's cheek—spots that match the red of his hair. There was confidence bordering on arrogance in the set of his head.

"Is a man crazy for wanting to do his job in this county?" he asked in a reined in voice. "Or am I wrong about that job? I thought I was hired to bring in the man that murdered the elected sheriff?"

"We do want the man that killed Ed Flint," the commissioner declared. "We want to hang him by the neck! But why

pick on Wheel and young Cohill? Log was cleared at the inquest."

"Log thought he was cleared!" Mattern differed sharply. "When old Finch Cohill stood up and perjured himself, swearin' that his black-haired boy was home that day with a bellyache. But I've found a couple of homesteaders who saw Log down on Cow Creek that day, riding the sorrel horse with the club foot. The same horse whose tracks we found in the gulch where Ed was shot!"

TIMBERLAKE wagged his head. "There ain't a settler on the Powder that wouldn't swear false oath to pin that killing on Wheel. Would you take the word of a squatter over the sworn statement of Finch Cohill?"

Ernie considered for a moment. "If it came to making such a choice, I would. But that's up to a judge and jury. I only make the arrests."

"Maybe you would," Timberlake conceded, his face flushed and sweating. "But not jury would. Your only making trouble for yourself, trying to make some for Wheel. You better listen, Ernie—"

A clatter of hoofs and wheels drowned out Timberlake. A buckboard rattled past the open window and pulled up at the Cowman's Bar. Ernie had a glimpse of Logan Cohill's handsome dark head as he swung down and tied the sleek bay team at the rail. He disappeared inside the swinging doors, shoulder to shoulder with big Strap Bowman, ex-range detective, ex-sheriff of Pease County, and present foreman of Wheel.

"The Little Bear, and the Middle-sized Bear," Ernie mused aloud. "I wonder, where is the man-killing big ol' He Bear?"

But the cavalcade was not yet ended. Through the dust turned up by the buckboard's wheels, rode six Cohill range hands, two abreast, in a sort of break-step military formation. All were armed, and Ernie Mattern wondered if the parade might be for his benefit. News traveled fast in Pease County.

"Whatever business Log has in town, he brought help," Ernie commented, turning toward the hat rack beside the door. "Well, he's saved me the ride out to Wheel."

Milt Timberlake watched the Sheriff buckle his gun belt. Malevolence blotched his florid face.

During the years that Mattern had served him as superintendent of the Timberlake Black Hills Stage Line, the old man had rejoiced in his assistant's hard-fisted, hair-triggered individuality. The job had required the services of a full-grown man, and no one denied that Ernie Mattern had his growth. He had taken orders from Timberlake implicitly, and no nonsense from others, and he'd made the stages run on time.

As a consequence, when the elected sheriff was shot from ambush thirty days ago, Timberlake had seen in his foreman a man who could take care of himself and of Milt Timberlake. As chairman of the county board, he had arranged the appointment. As Mattern's boss and prospective father-in-law, he had persuaded Ernie Mattern to accept.

But somewhere along the line, Timberlake's scheme had gone awry. Ernie Mattern, sheriff, was not the faithful and devoted employee who had enlarged the name of Timberlake in the territory as transportation staw-boss. In thirty days' time, Milt Timberlake had come to deplore the qualities he had once admired in Mattern. Seeing now that Ernie meant to defy him openly, he tried to speak, but choked, and coughed himself red-eyed.

"Ernie," he panted when he could breath again, "I can't let you do it!"

Mattern turned slowly to face Timberlake.

"Milt," he said flatly, "you can't stop me."

Timberlake made a spluttering sound, like a man who is drowning. He seized the edge of the desk in his pudgy hands and hauled himself erect.

"By Heck, I will stop you! I'm head of the county government, and I can see what's building up here, even if you can't. The homesteaders are talkin' Grange and servin' notice they intend to ignore the law. Finch Cohill has shipped in a dozen Texans to blast their Grange to hell. Each side is blamin' the other for Flint's killing. You serve papers on young Cohill now, and the farmers will take it as an invitation to take Wheel over, like thev've threatened!"

Mattern shook his head. "Milt, you're

talkin' through your hat . . . Enforcement of the law never encouraged anybody yet to take the law into his own hands. It's the want of enforcement that gets you mobs and lynchings. As for Finch Cohill, he can import a hundred gunmen, and it won't set him above the law while I'm Sheriff. He can hire a standing army and it won't give him license to murder every county official who won't fit into his vest pocket!"

Timberlake was leaning forward on his hands, propping himself against the desk, as if his legs would not support his weight. He was breathing laboriously through his mouth, and his eyes showed pools of red above his sagging lower lids. But he had conquered his anger, and his wheezing voice turned conciliatory, almost pleading.

"I don't say we shouldn't punish the man that murdered Ed Flint. I only say the time is wrong. Wait a month, Ernie, and I'll back you in whatever action you think is right."

Mattern's taut jaw relaxed a bit. Milt was getting at it now. Election was in a month, and Milt was standing for re-election.

Milt had big ideas politically. He thought that one more term as chairman of the Pease County Board would set him right in the Governor's chair. And Milt needed Wheel's support to get in—or thought he did.

Ernie repressed a smile. "Sorry, Milt. I hate to hurt your campaign. But I'm servin' this paper today."

"Serve it then!" the other bellowed. "Serve it and be damned! I appointed you to office and I can damned soon unappoint you! And if you think my little girl will marry a man that cuts my throat for nothing, you had better think again!"

"I think Mary knows what she wants," Mattern growled, anger kindling inside of him at mention of her. "I think you can leave her out of it. She's of age and so am I!"

Timberlake opened his mouth to reply. But Mattern had stepped out into the street and slammed the door behind him. Anger lengthened his stride and brought his boot heels down sharply on the hollow plank walk as he headed for the Cowman's Bar to arrest a man who likely would fight arrest.

THE Cowman's Bar was a palatial establishment for a town that boasted no church or hospital.

Unlike the other buildings which huddled in an irregular line between Click's Livery Barn and the county jail, the Cowman's Bar was covered outside with varnished clapboards, and had a painted sign. Inside, it was floored with native lumber, with tables for games and space for dancing.

The long bar at one side was of polished cherrywood, hauled piecemeal from Denver by mule team. Behind the counter were ornate cupboards laden with bottled merchandise and a center mirror with gold-scrolled edges.

Above the mirror, decently veiled by shadow, a somewhat smoky oil mural offered a robust woman, scantily clad, reclined upon a cushioned couch.

Logan Cohill and Strap Bowman were leaning over their drinks halfway down the long counter. Beyond them ranged the other Wheel Men. Eight pairs of eyes swung to the door as one, when Mattern pushed through. Log Cohill turned to face the lawman squarely. His black eyes were watchful, insolent. His left elbow rested on the bar. His right hand hung casually down, inches from the handle of his pistol.

Logan Cohill was heavy-set, well-knit, and handsome—in a sullen, cock-sure way. He wore fancy leather clothes and white sombrero, even on the range. A man was thrown instinctively on guard at first contact with his bold stare. But you'd never spot Strap Bowman for the killer he was. Not until he smiled.

Bowman was tallowy pale where Cohill was swart, drab where Cohill was swashbuckling. He was long and lean as wheatgrass, and his clothes hung loosely from his thin shoulders. His cheeks were flat, his eyes soft blue and sleepy. A drooping red mustache emphasized the sensitive line of his mouth.

Strap Bowman seemed strange company for Log Cohill, until he smiled. When he smiled, you saw his teeth, pointed and gleaming white—a throwback to the fighting teeth of primitive man. His jaw was narrow, tapering to a point.

Ernie Mattern would have preferred to tackle this pair one at a time. He would have liked a good sure man to stand back

here by the door and keep an eye on Bowman.

"Hello, Log!" he greeted the younger man heartily.

He held out his hand as he advanced. Cohill's eyes widened slightly at the unaccustomed show of cordiality. He put out his hand limply. Mattern's right closed on it with an iron grip, pulling the arm toward him. His left reached out deftly and snaked the bone-handled pistol from its holster.

Cohill wrenched his hand free. But he was staring into the muzzle of his own gun. He whirled on Strap Bowman to get support. But Mattern stepped quickly to one side and was covering the pair of them, keeping the other six in his range of vision.

"Take it easy, Strap," he warned, "unless you want to keep Log company."

The foreman shrugged. "I'm taking it easy as I know how, Ernie. I'm havin' me a sociable little drink with friends. A man gits just as far, bein' sociable, Ernie. Sol, bring the Sheriff a drink."

Sol Tremelling, the barkeep, came forward but Mattern waved him back.

"I won't need that drink today, Sol," he told the barman, his eyes still on the Wheel aggregation. "This just ain't sociable business that Log and I have to settle."

"Man shouldn't have business he can't go about in a sociable way," Bowman commented lazily. "That kind o' business leads to trouble, Ernie."

"Trouble we can handle, I reckon," the lawman agreed. "Log, you're under arrest. Better come peaceable."

THE only son of old Finch Cohill stiffened and searched Mattern's face for an instant. Then he relaxed.

"That ain't funny, Mattern."

"Neither is this warrant," Ernie muttered, his free hand producing the court document and spreading it on the bar. "But I didn't look for you to laugh it off."

Cohill read the paper through twice. Bowman craned his neck to read it over the younger man's shoulder. Cohill's face paled.

"What's the deal, Ernie? You think you can make that stick?"

"I can nail it on solid," Mattern informed him. "You were seen riding your club-footed sorrel down on Cow Creek the day Ed Flint was shot. I found the sorrel, too, Log. Shot dead in a gulch in the Wheel horse pasture. Saddle and bridle removed, and your boot tracks leading away from it. I expect your horse wasn't stole and rode by somebody else that day, after all. I guess you wasn't home with a gut ache."

"You ain't so square-headed Ernie, that you think you can make that squatters' evidence stand up in Amos Slack's court?"

Mattern shook his head, recalling the difficulty he'd had in prying the warrant out of the judge.

"I ain't even inter-ested in trying, Log. I'll take you to Cheyenne on a change of venue."

The lawman never had heard a silence so complete as that which descended when he finished speaking. He sensed the tension among the riders down the bar. He saw Sol Tremelling, from the corner of his eye, backing inconspicuously away from the bar. He felt Bowman watching him out of expressionless eyes. And he wished once more than he had a man to ride herd on the foreman.

"Does Milt Timberlake know about this?" Cohill demanded. "If this is one of his tricks, I'll slit that elephant gut of his and ram his mutton head inside it!"

"Milt knows—and don't like it," Mattern answered. "But Milt is not the Sheriff, Log. You're under arrest and you had better come peaceable."

Perspiration was dewing out upon the handsome dark face. The black eyes made a quick survey of the room, as if seeking an avenue of escape. Seeing none, the eyes came back to Strap Bowman.

"You can't take him, Ernie," Bowman said softly then, turning back to the bar. "There just ain't enough of you. You had better have a drink and forget it."

The instant that Mattern's eyes swung to Bowman, Cohill grabbed for Bowman's gun.

Cohill had the pistol out of the foreman's holster before Ernie could get to him. He was swinging the gun up to shoot when Ernie's gun slashed down against his head.

Cohill buckled, hitting the floor at Mattern's feet. Mattern placed one foot on the

barrel of the gun that had fallen from the rancher's hand and stood rigidly, his pistol threatening the others. He wanted to look down and see what damage he'd done to Cohill's head, but he didn't dare take his eyes from the crew at the bar.

Bowman didn't move an eye as Mattern looked in his direction. But he spoke a word that Mattern didn't catch, and the man standing next to him whirled, slapping at his holster. Mattern fired, and his slug knocked the man to the floor.

STRAP had created the diversion he sought. Even as Mattern fired at the man beside the foreman, he felt the pistol on the floor wrenched from beneath his boot. He took a long step backward, swinging his own gun down. Log Cohill had raised himself on one elbow, and the gun in his hand spouted red. Ernie felt the heat of the slug as it tore his sleeve at the shoulder. He snapped a shot at the rancher, and knew he'd hit, even though he'd had no time to aim. Cohill collapsed on his face, and Mattern swung his pistol back to cover Bowman.

"You want in this, Strap?" he demanded hoarsely through the smoke that stung his nose and throat. "Or will you go on hiding behind you trigger-happy bunch?"

Bowman wagged his head. Both his hands were on the counter top, where they had remained from the moment Ernie had entered the place.

"It ain't my fight. You ain't tryin' to serve no papers on me!"

"You *think* I'm not!" Mattern told him angrily. "In about as long a time as it takes me to prod Amos Slack into it, I'll paper you for obstruction of justice and abettin' a criminal assault on an officer of the law, and a couple other things I'll think up between now and then!"

As he spoke, the lawman looked down the line of men beyond the foreman. No one of these had moved, except the man on the end, next to Bowman. This man was back on his feet, gripping his shoulder. But his gun was on the floor, and he was looking sick. He wouldn't be needing any more attention.

"In the meantime," Mattern went on, coming back to Bowman, "put your gun on the counter and go fetch Doc Bently."

Bowman did not stir. "If you're thinkin' of Bently for Log there, why you haven't looked. Log's done for. He needs a parson, not a doctor!"

Mattern looked down, and saw that Bowman had spoken the truth. Log Cohill had turned over to his back. Blood welled from a wound high on the left side of his chest. His breath bubbled red.

"You've killed the son of the most influo-ential man in the county!" Bowman continued in a voice that nagged at the lawman. "You've killed him, and I've got six witnesses to say that I never moved my hands off this bar. Witnesses that'll say you crowded the fight and gave Log no chance. Ernie, you're out on a limb!"

Bowman was grinning in trimph. And Ernie had the uncomfortable feeling that the foreman had planned things just about as they had happened.

"Timberlake won't back you in this," Bowman intoned, relishing each word as it was spoken. "Judge Slack won't back you neither. If the homesteaders stand behind you, they're making a poor bet.

"This about washes you up as Sheriff, Mattern. Might even hang time Bullfinch Cohill gits through with you. If I know Finch, he'll take this kinda personal!"

II

ERNIE MATTERN forced himself to eat a steak that night in Hambone Hawley's eating house next to the Cowman's Bar. The moon was up, round and full, when he paid his check and stepped out onto the shadowed street.

A light burned in his office. Through the open window he could see three figures seated about his desk. In the big wicker chair was Milt Timberlake. Across from Milt sat Bill Clifford and Christian Schraeder, the remaining county board members.

Mattern smiled bitterly. He had killed a man that day in the line of duty—the man who had murdered his predecessor. But that man had been the son of an individual who was feared individually and collectively by the men who ran the county. And instead of voting Ernie a bonus, the board had met in emergency session to consider lifting his badge.

Mattern's first impulse was to crash the meeting, and demand to be heard in his own defense. But he was able to shrug the

inclination aside. Ernie was old enough to know that nothing he could say would influence the thinking of the scared little men who handled the county's business.

Besides, Ernie had brought Ed Flint's killer to justice. They could lift his badge now if they wanted. By and large, he would be glad to get shed of it even if he would be fair game for Wheel tomorrow.

From long habit, he turned left from Hambone Hawley's eating house, and started walking slowly across a rubbish-littered flat, toward a neat log cabin which sat on the willowed bank of Little Blue Creek, a hundred yards from town. As he did so, a furtive shadow skittered behind a lumber pile some twenty yards ahead of him.

Ernie hesitated for a second, then continued to walk boldly toward the lumber.

He was aware that he made a clear target in the moon light. But experience had taught him that moonlight killers would rather shoot at a man's back than at his front. Also, he had a feeling that if he started now to run from shadows, he would never stop running. So he didn't stop until the lumber pile was directly before him. His hand was on the butt of his gun, and when a man straightened suddenly from the lumber to stand before him, the gun was instantly in his hand.

"Now take hit easy, Ernie," a nasal voice twanged. "I only wanted to tell you somethin'."

Mattern recognized his accoster, and he didn't lower his pistol. The man was called Lobo Jones, and if he had any other name, he'd never been known to speak it. He was currently employed as wolfer and pelter for Wheel, and he was regarded as a bad one to fool with.

Lobo Jones stood as tall as Ernie Mattern, in the flat-heeled walking boots he wore, slit at the sides to give freedom to his flat, splayed feet. He was long and lean and big jointed, like a race horse which has been put to the plow. His clothes were greasy and ill-fitting, and he reeked of whiskey and rancid pelts. His intelligence was superior to that of the wolves he hunted for bounty. Drunk or sober, he was the surest rifle shot in the country.

"What you want to tell me that you've got to hang around my shack like a coyote to say it?"

"Got this to say, Ernie. Ol' Bullfinch daubed on his warpaint when he heerd you'd killed young Log. He's a-going to get you. He's done offered every man on his payroll a five hundred dollar bonus the day your dead body turns up riddled with lead."

MATTERN had no reason to doubt the statement. It squared with everything he knew of Finch Cohill. Finch would spend a thousand dollars any day to hang a man who'd killed a thirty dollar cow. So he'd stop at no expense to avenge the death of his only son.

"That's mighty interesting news, Lobo," Ernie drawled. "But you ain't said why you couldn't tell me it in the daylight."

"Hell," the wolfer whined, "Ol' Finch and Bowman's both in town tonight to palaver with Timberlake and the county board. They see me jawin' with you, they'd stake my pelt to dry."

Mattern looked at the dirty animal tracker with skepticism and rancor. "When did you start lookin' after me so careful, Lobo? It make you love me when I picked you up for pelting a settler's cow, and Finch had to pay your fine?"

The wolfer's eyes went sly. "I don't love you none, Ernie. Maybe I'd like another Sheriff. Maybe I'd like to see you hand in your badge and vamoose."

"Maybe you'd like me to hand in the badge so you could put a bullet in me and win your five hundred dollars without killing an officer o' the law."

"That tin star didn't make Ed Flint live any longer," Lobo pointed out, grinning crookedly.

"The man that killed him is on a slab over at Whiskey Dick's," Mattern retorted. "Dead as if he'd hung."

"Wal, I thought I'd tell you what's on the fire. G'bye, Ernie."

Lobo stood a moment waiting for Mattern to leave the lumber pile. Mattern sat down, gun in hand.

"I'll just wait here a minute, Lobo, to make shore you find your way back to town."

Reaching down behind the boards, Lobo fished up a rifle and shuffled off into the dark. Mattern continued on his way across the flat.

There were many questions in Mattern's

mind. But of one thing he was certain. Lobo Jones had waited for him in the dark that night. He'd had a rifle, and he hadn't wanted to be seen. Either he'd meant to kill Ernie, and had lost his nerve when Ernie walked straight up to him, or else Cohill had sent him to warn Ernie—to break Ernie down and pry him away from his badge so that Cohill wouldn't have to kill another Sheriff.

A light burned in the unblinded window of the rambling log house. The sight was assuring, at a time when he needed assurance.

Then he saw her through the lighted window standing rigidly against the wall beyond the lamp, as if listening. He saw her plainly, a small, pretty, self-contained girl, waiting for his arrival, fearing likely that he wouldn't come. And as he looked at her, the strong logical arguments he had prepared for her somehow lost their meaning.

His stride shorted and finally stopped altogether, and he stood a moment in the dark.

He stepped onto the porch, scuffing his boots loudly. He stepped inside the cozily furnished room, closing the door behind him.

"Hello, Mary!" he exclaimed, more heartily than he felt.

Mary had not stirred from where he'd seen her through the window. She nodded, her eyes followed his every move and action, frightened, puzzled.

"Hello, Mary," he repeated, approaching her. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

Until he'd spoken, her eyes had followed him with a sort of blank detachment, as if he'd been someone she did not know. At the sound of his voice, she seemed to rouse.

"Of course I'm glad to see you, Ernie," he said, giving him a wan smile. "Oh, yes!"

"Then show it!" he commanded, pulling her to him.

HE THOUGHT she shrank from him as he reached for her. But he closed his mind to this, and kissed her with unaccustomed vehemence. She had never given of herself in her kisses, in the way that other women he had kissed had done. But tonight her mouth would have avoided his entirely, if he had permitted it. Her hands were quickly pushing at his chest, in protest.

He held her a moment more before he released her. She leaned against the wall, and her eyes looked at him fully for the first time since he'd entered the room. They were veiled and empty again, recoiling from his eyes as her body had recoiled from his.

It was a thing he had feared more than the reprisals of her father. More than the avenging plans of Finch Cohill.

"So you've heard," he said dully.

"I've heard," she affirmed in a voice that scarcely carried to him. Then she burst out with a passion that surprised him, "Oh, Ernie, you've got to get away. They will kill you!"

A vast feeling of relief took Mattern. She was only worried for him! He raised his eyes, and his grin now held all its old cocky challenge.

"I'll take a lot of killing, Mary! Why, for a minute, you had me worried!"

Mary Timberlake shook her head. "You don't understand, Ernie. You've got to leave Wyoming—tonight. For all our sake, you must, Ernie!"

There was an urgency in her voice which Mattern had never heard before.

"For all who's sake, Mary?"

"For your sake, Ernie. And mine. And Dad's—all the county's! Don't you see?"

"Maybe I could if you would explain it, Mary."

She turned to adjust the wick of the lamp which was blackening the chimney. When it was regulated, she did not face him again.

"If you stay here there will be war. More men will be killed, women widowed, children orphaned. Surely you can see that!"

Mattern nodded.

"It looks like war, right enough, Mary, so long as Finch Cohill and Wheel insist on one kind of law for themselves, and another for the rest of the county. My staying or going won't change that."

"But it will!" the girl insisted. "Finch Cohill called on Dad, here, tonight. He said he would like to meet with the county board and straighten things out, without any more shooting. But he said he wouldn't talk so long as you were Sheriff."

"Because he knows that as long as I'm

Sheriff he'll have to live up to the law or take the consequences," Mattern told her patiently. "Can't you see what Cohill wants, Mary? If I resign, he'll have the star pinned on Strap Bowman again, so that he can make the law his personal weapon in his fight on the settlers."

"It isn't your fight, Ernie. You don't own any land. You said you'd take the star to bring Ed Flint's killer to justice. Well, you killed Logan Cohill. What more do you want?"

"If the board asks me for my resignation, Mary," he told her quietly, "I'll give it to them."

She turned upon him quickly. Her voice was clear and vehement.

"But the board can't ask you for your resignation! Can't you see that, Ernie? If the board does that, it will be siding with Wheel against the settlers. If they keep you on they'll be siding with the settlers against Wheel. The board, Ernie, has to remain neutral. It—"

"Neutral!" The word dropped from Mattern's open mouth. His puzzled eyes searched the face of the girl he had thought he knew. He understood she was merely parroting what she'd heard from her father. But she must not have heard him right.

Even bumbling Milt Timberlake would not say a thing so silly.

"Good Lord, Mary, do you know what you're saying? You said a minute ago there was war brewing between Wheel and the settlers. Now you talk of the county board staying neutral! What's your idea of the function of government? To sit on the sidelines while one side kills the other off—for fear of offending one or the other, by taking sides?"

His tone was more harsh than he'd intended.

The girl turned her back again, and raised her handkerchief to her eyes.

"You just don't want to understand," she told him.

"Maybe I don't," he admitted. "What does Milt think they elected him to the board for if not to run the county and deal with such emergencies as this?"

"He's trying to deal with it," the girl insisted. "He says if you leave, Wheel will be satisfied. If you leave of your own accord, the settlers will have no complaint against the board, and the board can straighten things out."

"If I leave," Ernie said tonelessly, "there will be a war, and Wheel will have the upper hand. That's what Finch Cohill wants."

Mattern felt the homesteaders would not thank him for fighting their fight. They'd rabbit as quick as Timberlake had done, once the squeeze was on.

Mary was right. It wasn't his fight. It *was* his girl.

"You win," he whispered, going to her, taking her elbows in his hands, smelling the tantalizing perfume of her hair. "I'll go away. Name a place where you'll meet me. I'll wait for you there."

He felt her stiffen. "I couldn't come to you, Ernie."

"Couldn't come to me?"

"Would you expect me to, Ernie? Now, I mean? Would you want me to live the life of a hunted animal?"

"But that's the life you're asking me to lead. Would you ask me to live that way, and wouldn't be willing to live that way yourself?"

"It isn't only the running away, Ernie. Of course I'd do that. But, Ernie—it's you!"

"Me, Mary?"

"You. You frighten me, Ernie. You're so brutal and rough sometimes—intolerant of everything you don't agree with! Now —this."

"This?"

She nodded, half defiantly. The purple eyes faltered from his. But the mouth was firm.

"This! Ernie, you didn't have to kill him. Father tried to persuade you not to go to the bar. You wouldn't listen. Something was in your blood. You shot him and killed him! His blood is on your hands forever!"

"Listen to me, Mary!" he said harshly. "I didn't go there to kill him. I'm the Sheriff, remember? I had evidence he had committed murder. I went to arrest him. He tried to kill me. I didn't shoot to kill. He gave me no time to aim."

"But you took the job, Ernie. And you went to the bar after him. He didn't come after you. The choosing was yours. Father says a Sheriff's star gives a natural killer a chance to kill and go free to kill again!"

THE girl was watching him, concern in her eyes. Concern for Mary Timberlake, not for Ernie Mattern, he suddenly realized. He moved slowly toward her. Mary retreated.

Mattern followed inexorably. Soon the wall was at her back. She stood trembling as he halted before her, the scream in her throat unable to break through.

Mattern reached out. His fingers touched her throat, gently. And he wondered that the flesh of one so cold and selfish could be so wonderfully warm to touch.

"You see, Mary," he murmured. "You were wrong. I'm no killer. Your throat is between my hands. It would break so easy, Mary."

He increased the pressure of his fingers and the horror that held her silent, the fear that glazed her eyes.

He knew then that she *was* afraid of him. He knew she had been afraid of him, from the first. She had accepted his advances only because her father needed him, and because she had been her father's means of holding him.

He was grateful for the knowledge, hard as it was on his ego. It killed whatever was left of his yearning for her. It killed his anger even, and left him wondering dully how he could have been in love with this girl.

He dropped his hands and left the room without speaking. He stood a moment on the darkened porch blinking into the dark.

He could see Mary still standing rigidly against the wall. Her eyes were still closed.

Then he heard a faint stirring in a thicket at the corner of the porch. He dived quickly for the shrubbery at the opposite end. As he jumped, a rifle spoke from the thicket. A round blue jet of flame lanced the dark, and his hat was knocked from his head.

Mattern was on hands and knees in the shelter of the brush. His pistol was in his hand. He fired twice at the thicket.

He was rewarded with a grunt. Then a long lean figure burst forth, moving erratically toward the porch, hands high above his head.

Mattern recognized Lobo Jones's ungainly form. Jones stumbled, coughed, and went down.

Then the door opened and the lamplight made a yellow rectangle on the floor of the porch. The light fell on the Wheel wolfer's whiskered face. Lobo tried to rise, then sank down and lay still.

"You might be right about me, after all, Mary," Mattern addressed the huddled figure in the door. "There is more evidence for you."

Shouts and footsteps came from the direction of Main Street, as men poured from the bars and gaming houses to investigate the shots. Mattern slapped on his hat and vaulted the fence. He headed for the willow-fringed banks of the Little Blue.

The county sheriff was a fugitive already! The county sheriff had to run, or fight, and there was nothing to fight for any more.

III

MARY TIMBERLAKE screamed piercingly, seeing the bloody form on the porch. Her screams attracted the crowd who had poured out of the saloon to investigate the shots.

Ernie Mattern forded the shallow stream and made his way back in the direction of the settlement, hidden by the willows that fringed the creekbanks.

A light still burned in the jail office, and the idea of appearing personally before the assembled board, to tender his resignation, appealed to his sense of recklessness.

So far as he had been able to determine, no one had left the jail to investigate the shooting.

Mattern approached the building from the rear, and found two horses tethered. He recognized the horses. One was the mount of old Finch Cohill. The other was Strap Bowman's big sorrel.

Mattern had not counted on this. But it was a convenience having everybody together.

A thin smile pulled at his lips as he let himself in the jail's back door and moved silently down the dark corridor between the cells. A week before, Mattern had arrested a homesteader on charges of beefing a Wheel cow to feed his family. Judge Slack had bound Jake Rye over for trial in the district court, and had ordered him confined, in lieu of bail that Rye could not furnish.

Mattern halted in front of Jake's cell.

"Jake?" he whispered softly.

He received no answer.

"Jake," he repeated. "It's me, Ernie."

"Yeah, Ernie."

Mattern fumbled with the keys, found the proper one, and turned it silently in the oiled lock.

"You dressed, Jake?"

"All but my boots, Ernie."

"Pull 'em on."

When the prisoner had complied, Ernie continued. "I killed Log Cohill today, Jake. Killed him resisting arrest. Milt is afraid I've spoiled his chances for being Governor. He's lifting my badge, turning the county over to Wheel.

"It's a penitentiary offense to turn you loose, Jake. But I won't leave you in here for Strap Bowman to play with. There's two horses out back. Take one. I might be following you soon myself."

"You're a white man, Ernie," Jake said simply.

The prisoner stepped around Mattern in the dark and headed for the rear door. Ernie put out a hand.

"Hold on a minute, Jake. I'm still the Sheriff, and will be for a minute or two yet. I might need a deputy. Would you take the job."

The settler was silent so long Ernie thought he'd refuse. But, at last, he spoke.

"By heck, Ernie, that's the least I can do for you."

"Then you're swore, Jake," Ernie said, turning to the door which led to the office.

Mattern drew his gun and eased the barrier open. Five startled men jerked their heads toward the sound. They saw a widening dark crack, between the door and the casing. They saw a .45 protruding through a crack.

"The first man that moves is dead," came the voice.

They all recognized the voice.

When the jail door was open wide, none of the five in the office offered to do any more than blink his eyes. "Jake, walk up and draw the shades. Then lock the door. We don't want this comin' session of the board to be interrupted."

When the shades were drawn and the front door locked, Ernie Mattern stepped into the lamp-lighted office, his pistol still threatening the group.

"I don't like to talk to a bunch like this with a gun in my hand," he remarked. "There is too much temptation to use it. Jake, if you'll relieve the gentlemen of their weapons, I can dispense with mine. I feel like talkin', and I always did need both hands to express myself."

At that moment, Bowman's canted chair hit the floor. Simultaneously, the Wheel foreman's hand struck the butt of his low-slung gun. Mattern's pistol jerked over to take a line on the offender's head. The hammer under his thumb clicked to a cock.

Bowman froze, hunched forward on his chair, his gun almost clear of leather. His eyes clashed with Mattern's.

"How about the rest of you?" he hissed. "Do I get any support or don't I?"

A moment dragged in silence. It was Mattern who finally spoke.

"Looks like you don't get any support, Strap. Your play's all busted. Better leave it alone."

Bowman's eyes fell, and he removed his hand from his gun-butt. He glared about him at the others in the room. The others managed not to be looking at him.

"That was a real temptation, Strap!" Mattern said, the tension going out of him. "Jake, you better lift Strap's artillery first. It might get him shot. Take that that derringer out of his boot, and see what's up his sleeve."

The lawman stood watchful and alert while his special deputy disarmed those who had brought guns to the meeting. Then, while Rye shepherded the captured weapons, Mattern addressed the embarrassed group.

"Well, gentlemen, it seems we're all here now. Let's proceed with the business before the group. What *is* tonight's business, Milt? Interviewing candidates for Sheriff, maybe?"

Timberlake was snorting through his nose. "What's the meaning of this, Ernie, breaking in here, armed like a bandit, holding us up? This is a closed meeting—executive session—"

MATTERN cut his eyes at Cohill and Bowman, and allowed himself a smile. "It don't look like you closed it quick enough, Milt, to keep the flies out.

Or were you fixin' to resign in favor of Cohill and turn everything over to Wheel?"

Timberlake choked and coughed himself crimson. A dry, rattling voice lashed out at Mattern from another quarter.

"My advice to you, young man, is to stop fairgrounding and get yourself out of the country! You have killed your last man, hiding behind that law badge. You opened an account with me today when you killed my boy. I'm agoin' to see you hang!"

Mattern looked full into Cohill's pinched face.

"I realize it's rugged on you Cohills when officers of the law refuse to let you gun them down like elk in season!" he said acidly. "And I've got a word of advice for you, Finch. When you get me, you'd better get me like you got Ed Flint, or you'll run into a hot-lead shower."

"You're a brave hombre when you have a gun and the other fellow doesn't!" the old man sneered. "I hear that's how you killed Log. Grabbed his gun while you were shakin' his hand. Then shot him down, givin' him no chance!"

Ernie Mattern's jaw came out like a shuttle.

"If you got your information from Bowman, then he's a snake-tongued liar. Bowman crowded that fight from the first. Bowman let Log think he'd back his hand, and rumped around where Log could get at his gun. When Log made his play, Bowman sow-bellied and left Log out front! Do you deny it, Strap?"

The foreman shrugged, and his sleepy eyes looked through Ernie's without really meeting them.

"You're tellin' it, Ernie."

Mattern's eyes went back to Cohill. He knew then it was useless. Cohill believed only what he chose to believe. Mattern's face was drawn and pale. His voice, when he spoke, was savage.

"Jake, Mr. Cohill wants his pistol. He wants to test my nerve. Put it in his holster, Jake, like mine. Now, Cohill, stand up. I won't touch my gun until yours is clear."

Cohill stiffened on his chair. His eyes lifted to Mattern's. Ernie saw resolution building up in them, and he thought that the old man would stand. Then he saw panic climbing up the leathery cheeks, and saw the resolution crumble. The black eyes lowered to the floor and did not rise.

But Ernie wasn't through with him. Finch Cohill had killed a dozen men personally in his time—most of them from behind, with a rifle. He had been directly responsible for the deaths of many more, including Ed Flint. And it seemed logical to Ernie at the moment that, having rid the country of one malignant influence, he should make it a clean sweep and eliminate all the Cohills, before leaving. He crowded this fight, intending to kill.

"What's the matter, Finch?" he asked hoarsely. "You find it harder to kill a man who's armed and facing you? You need help to stand on your feet?"

Seizing the rancher by the shirt front, he dragged him from his chair.

"You need more help to get at that gun?" Ernie rasped. He brought up his hand and slapped the thin cheeks, first with his palm, then with the back of his hand.

No one interfered. The novelty of seeing Cohill manhandled and shamed as he had shamed many others appealed to every man in the room.

But Finch Cohill did not draw. When Mattern released him, he collapsed on his chair, gray and shaken.

"Looks like he's leaving his killings up to you, Strap," he crackled, his fury needing another target. "How about it? You want that pistol he can't use?"

But Bowman's eyes were sleepy and detached once more. He shook his head. "I can wait, Ernie."

"Till some night when my back is turned!" Mattern added. Ernie took the pistol from Cohill's belt and turned to Timberlake.

"Well, Milt," we still haven't accomplished the business of this meetin'. By the way, speakin' of that business, ain't you getting the cart in front of the horse? Ain't it proper procedure to fire a man before you start takin' applications for his job? Or did you think that Mary would have me chippied into resignin' by now?"

Timberlake turned livid. But his eyes would not risk an encounter with Mattern's.

It was Bill Clifford who spoke. Bill

Clifford, newest member of the board, whose chief qualification for public office was that he had driven his brother's bakery wagon in Laramie for a number of years.

"Aw now Ernie," this worthy squawked. "You're bein' a hell of a poor sport over losin' a job."

"I'm not losin' a job!" Mattern refuted, swinging on him. "There isn't one of you that has guts enough to fire me! If I lose out, it will be because I quit. And if I quit, it will be because I can't stomach the company 'round here!"

"That's what I mean. I can't see why you—"

"There's too damned much you can't see!" Mattern cut him off. "So button your lip! Milt has reasons for selling the county out. Milt wants to be Governor, and he thinks that will get him there. I can respect a man for going after what he wants even if I don't like him for it. I can't respect a man who's too thick between the ears to know what he's doin'. So dry up till you get a thought of your own. I got no time for you!"

Mattern turned on Schraeder, the fat, aging poolroom operator whose membership completed the board.

But Schraeder had nothing to say. His jowled face was vacant and bewildered. All the words spoken there that night had been over his head. He didn't know what went on in the county he was supposed to help govern, or on the board of which he was a member. He recoiled from Mattern as if expecing to be annihilated.

Mattern walked to the desk and removed the star from his shirt. Next, he removed the cord from around his neck—the twine that held the wedding ring he had carried with him for two years—wrapped the twine around the star, and dropped the two together on the table in front of Timberlake.

"There they are, Milt. I'll give you your way because it's my way, to. I'll resign them both. They go together, don't they—the job and your daughter? You should explain to Strap about that extry bonus. Maybe he'd work for smaller wages if he knew that there were other compensations for pimpin' for M. Timberlake!"

The elephantine politician reared to his feet, pawing the air like a gun-panicked horse. But he choked on the words he could not utter, and his face turned from red to blue. His mouth fell open, and he sank back on his chair, sucking for breath and gurgling hoarsely.

"Well," Ernie announced, "Jake and I would admire to stay for the rest of the meetin' but we've pressing business. We'll have to insist, though, that the remainder of the session be conducted in back. Jake, open the door for the gentlemen and guide 'em into the apartment you just vacated."

A low murmur of protest and outraged resentment went through the group as Mattern herded them toward the jail at the rear. But Finch Cohill was the only man to speak.

"I'll hunt you down with bloodhounds, Mattern!" the rancher promised. The words brought a smile to Ernie's face.

"I've had to deal with two of your dogs already, Finch. One is in the morgue, and I left your big ol' wolfhound over on Milt's front porch, half an hour ago, bleedin' like a hog! But send 'em along—as long as they last!"

When the cell door had clicked shut on the party, Strap Bowman spoke up.

"You're ridin' high tonight, Ernie. But tomorrow's on its way."

"And I'm on *my* way, Strap!" Mattern replied, almost gaily, locking the heavy door between the office and the jail. "By the time they cut you boys out o' here I'll be where the flies are not so thick!"

TRUE to his prediction, Mattern was far out of the Powder River Valley by the time the sun rose next day. He reasoned that Cohill would expect him to head south to Casper, or north to Sheridan, where the trail was easy. For this reason, he had headed west into the Big Horn Mountains, the most unlikely trail a fugitive could take.

He had no great fear of immediate pursuit. He had locked the jail behind him and thrown away the keys.

After parting company with Jake Rye, who now would be spreading word of the Sheriff's flight among the settlers, Mattern had ridden the creekbeds and had given the settlers' homes a wide swing in the dark, so as not to alarm their dogs. He knew he was riding for his very life, and he'd even misled Jake Rye on the matter of the direction he'd intended to take. He

had one more job to do, though. He should warn Jim Flagg.

Next to Mattern himself, Jim Flagg was very likely top on Cohill's list of men to be eliminated. Flagg had a shrewd mind, and a fluent tongue. Jim said a lot of things that more cautious men were silent about these days.

Flagg was spearheading the farmers' movement to organize the Grange, to combat Finch Cohill and the Stock Growers' Association. Flagg was insisting that the small ranchers be granted equal rights with Wheel to use public land. Flagg was even talking up a Northern Wyoming Stock Growers' Association, in opposition to the older organization which maintained headquarters in Cheyenne. And this was a blow directed straight at the heart of the big interests, like Wheel, which held the territorial government and most of the county governments in the hollow of their hand.

A law passed by the territorial legislature, at the direction of the big stock interests, stated that he "Stock Growers' Association" should set the dates for all cattle roundups in the territory, and Association members conducted these roundups to their own advantage. Non-association members, if they turned cattle on the public land, lost those cattle to entrenched rivals like Cohill who made the laws. Now Jim Flagg had come up with the idea of organizing a rival "Stock Growers' Association," and setting dates for an earlier roundup along the Powder, which would give its members opportunity to brand their own cattle.

Jim Flagg might get away with it, too, if he lived. The law did not specify which association should set the dates. Jim would be within the law if he got his association started. But with Strap Bowman in the Sheriff's chair again, Jim might not live the week out.

It wasn't much of a spread, Flagg's place. A dirt-roofed cabin, with a dugout stable, and a scrubby corral. The meadows along the fence were narrow and poor, and the fence had been cut in a dozen places. Fifty head of fat, bally-faced cattle grazed off the precious growth, unchallenged by the owner. The cattle wore the Wheel brand. Ernie grinned wryly.

If all Wheel's enemies were as unattentive as Flagg, Finch Cohill's claim to the public domain would not meet much opposition.

Down by the creek, buzzards were wheeling slowly. Milt Timberlake, Ernie decided, had done him a real favor. Enforcing the law in the country like this was a superhuman task. The big operators cut their smaller rivals' fences to graze off their land. The little men retaliated by beefing the big operator's cattle for food. And both factions screamed at the Sheriff for not protecting their interests.

A DAY before, Mattern's badge would have obligated him to ride down into those trees to investigate the attraction for the birds. And he doubted not that he'd find the remains of a fat Wheel steer butchered out for beef. Then he'd have to take Jim Flagg in, as he had taken in Jake Rye, to let a biased judge decide who was in the wrong.

Well, dead Wheel beeves were Strap Bowman's headaches now. But Ernie would warn Jim Flagg of the change in the weather before leaving him to it...

He hallooed the cabin but there was no response.

The buzzards suddenly took on an ugly significance. Ernie swung down from his horse and approached the door. The latch lifted under his hand, and the door opened inward.

A rifle barrel materialized out of the dark beyond the widening crack. A voice spoke sharply.

"Stand where you are or I'll shoot!"

The voice was feminine, and there was no doubting that it was sincere. Mattern looked beyond the steady rifle muzzle and found a pair of frightened hazel eyes, framed by a head of flaming red hair.

A red-haired woman holding a rifle commands respect. Ernie did not wink an eye.

"Who are you?" the girl demanded. "What do you want?"

Mattern hadn't known that Flagg had a wife.

"Sorry, ma'am. I was lookin' for Jim. When he didn't answer my yell I thought maybe he was asleep."

He turned to leave.

"Stand where you are until you tell

me who you are and what you want!"

The click of the rifle hammer punctuated the request.

"I'm a friend of Jim's," he said in desperation. "And you wouldn't know my name if you heard it."

"I have met Jim's friends. I haven't met you. What's the name?"

"Mattern!" he blurted angrily. "Ernie Mattern of Henrietta. Ex-sheriff of Pease County. My father was John, my mother Nora. I was born in Leavenworth, Kansas. I came west—"

"If you are Ernie Mattern you tell *me* where my brother is!"

"Your brother?"

"Jim Flagg. The man your deputies arrested and took away!"

"*My* deputies? Arrested *Jim?* Ma'am, one of us is crazy!"

The rifle was withdrawn, and the door was slammed in his face.

"Miss Flagg," he called, "can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," she yelled through the door. "And I'll plug you if you come in."

"Get hold of yourself, Miss. How long ago was Jim arrested? What did the deputy look like?"

"Jim was arrested three days ago. The deputy was tall and thin and had teeth like a wolf."

"Look, miss. This may be serious. I was Sheriff of Pease County up until last night. I never had a deputy. I didn't order Jim's arrest. I haven't seen Jim in a month." There was a silence, behind the door. Then the voice spoke more urgently.

"If you are Mattern, and if Jim wasn't arrested, where did those men take him?"

Mattern wasn't prepared to answer that. Not even to himself.

"Did Jim know the man that arrested him?"

"He seemed to. But he didn't call him by name. The man said he had been deputized by you to bring Jim in on charges of killing a Wheel cow. Jim laughed when he went with him."

The buzzards above the cottonwoods. The cut fences. The Wheel cattle feeding undisturbed in Flagg's meadow. The pieces all fitted together in a pattern that Ernie didn't like.

"How long have you been here, Miss. Where did you come from?"

"I have been here two weeks. I teach school in Casper. I came here to file on a homestead."

"Don't you like teaching?" Mattern grinned.

"Of course. I filed on the homestead for Jim."

Mattern's grin widened. The homesteaders too had tricks for getting control of more ground than the law specified, though their grabs were petty larceny compared to the deals the big outfits put over.

"Why didn't you ride into town and report it when he didn't come back?"

"Because Jim said he'd be back. He told me to stay here and keep the door locked."

"Didn't you see any of your neighbors in all this time?"

"No. Jim asked the others here for a meeting tonight. I was going to tell them tonight if he didn't come back."

The suspicion in Mattern's mind hardened to bleak certainty.

"Miss," he said earnestly, "I *am* Ernie Mattern, and a friend of Jim's. Do you believe that?"

"I think so," the girl said, after a pause.

"I'll see if I can find Jim for you."

When the girl made no reply, Ernie mounted his horse reluctantly.

Twenty minutes later he approached the cottonwood stand he had observed earlier.

A buzzard took wing from the underbrush, rising slowly among the trees, its long red neck outstretched.

There were other birds about, also. Gorged till they could not fly. Reeling through the brush like drunken men.

Mattern rode into the grove.

The grass had been trampled by many hoofs. Strap Bowman had had help, waiting out of sight of the Flagg cabin. The dead smell became strong. Then he saw it.

It was the horse which the birds had been working on. A heavy-boned animal —a work horse. Jim Flagg's horse. It had been shot between the eyes. The buzzards had almost stripped its bones.

The man was still hanging from the

limb of a tree near by. His hands were bound behind his back. Jim Flagg's face was black as coal.

IV

MATTERN untied the hard-hemp lariat and lowered the body into a horse blanket he had brought along from the stable.

He rolled the blanket tightly around the swollen, stinking remains, lashed the bundle expertly with his own catch rope, and slung it crosswise of his protesting horse.

He did not follow the trail back to the homestead.

Instead, he followed the creek, keeping its fringe of willows between him and the shack, until he had circled it to come in from the rear. He put the body in the stable, still trussed up, and went to the house.

The door opened to his knock. The girl still held the rifle.

"You're back—so soon?"

Mattern nodded.

"Then you're not going to look for Jim?"

"Not any longer, Miss."

A shadow of annoyance crossed the girl's face. Then she looked at him more fully, seeing the grim cast of his mouth. Her eyes seemed unable to tear away from Mattern's face. Ernie endured the hot, burning stare, seeing question after question take shape in them, only to find their answers in her own knowledge.

"Where was he?"

"In the cottonwoods, a mile down the canyon."

"Was he shot?"

"Not shot, Miss. Hanged."

He saw her flinch at the word. But he saw no way to spare her. She had to know. Still, she seemed too stunned to fully realize.

"You left him—hanging?"

"I brought him in, Miss. He's out in the stable."

Instantly, she was on her feet, headed for the door. Mattern caught her by the wrists.

"You can't go out there," he told her. "He's been dead a week. Remember him the way you saw him last."

"Mind your business!" she lashed out at him, jerking free. Mattern shrugged and let her go.

After a short time she came back. Her skin was colorless and transparent like a winter cloud. Her reddish brown eyes were vacant.

Mattern sloshed the dipper half full from the jug, and held it to her lips. She drank, obedient as a child. The girl sat on an overturned nail keg and stared at the wall. Mattern watched her with rising concern. He saw that the first stunning shock of what she had seen was wearing off. He saw her features working, her lips moving soundlessly, her hands clenching and unclenching, as she fought stoically for control.

"Why did they do this to Jim?" the girl asked suddenly. Her voice was dry and rasping. Ernie's throat hurt, just hearing her.

"There is a land war going on, Miss. There have been other killings like this. There will be more."

"But why—why. He never harmed a soul in his life!"

"Jim stood in the way of a rock crusher, Miss. Jim saw too much, and said too much. He made too many people see what Finch Cohill was up to. People up here took Cohill for granted till Jim came along. Jim couldn't stomach what he saw. He took Cohill on, and the judge, and the county board, and the Wyoming Stock Growers—with the governor backing them all! It was David and Goliath, all over again. But this time the ending was different."

"Can Cohill kill any man who stands in his way and escape punishment?"

"He stands to do just that, Miss."

"You were Sheriff, you say, when my brother was killed. Are you going to do anything about this?"

The question was an accusation. And Mattern squirmed. He'd been waiting for her to get around to this.

"I'm not Sheriff now."

"Why did you resign?"

Mattern flushed. He couldn't tell this girl the reason. Anyhow, it wouldn't sound like a reason to her.

"The board was going to lift my badge anyhow. And Cohill had sworn to kill me as quick as I wasn't Sheriff any more."

"So you ran away."

"The Sheriff before me was murdered," Ernie said defensively.

"Jim was warned to leave the country, too!" the girl said bitterly. "But he didn't run."

"And Jim's dead!" Mattern commented cruelly, trying to justify a thing he could never justify to himself. He found himself wanting to hurt this girl as she was hurting him. Hurt her as another had hurt him.

The girl did not reply. But Ernie could not get her last words out of his mind.

"You say Jim was warned to leave the country?"

She nodded. "The night he met me in Henrietta, he received a human ear in the mail. There was no message with it. But Jim said it was a warning he would be killed. He laughed, and said he'd stay where he was!"

"Do you still have that ear?"

"Jim threw it away. But why should you want to see it? You're not the Sheriff. Your life was in danger and you resigned."

Mattern colored under her sarcasm. But he guessed he had it coming. He paced up and down the little room.

"MISS," he said, "you asked me why Jim was killed. A couple of years ago the legislature in Cheyenne, dancing the tune called by men like Cohill, voted to let the Stock Growers Association set the dates of all roundups in the territory, and put Stock Growers in charge of all the roundups.

"Last year the Stock Growers imported a trainload of toughs to travel around the territory at roundup time, standin' the small ranchers off while the big operators swept the range clear of cattle, branding everything in their own irons.

"Everything was legal and inside the law because the big operators made the law. There wasn't much a man could do. But a few tried. Jim Averill and Ella Watson tried, down at Bothwell. They were taken out of their homes and hanged. Jones and Tisdale tried it here on the Powder. They were shot from ambush. Your brother tried. This is what happens."

The girl nodded. And for an instant her grief and despair were submerged in a fierce kind of pride. "I *know* he tried! He called this meeting tonight—to set a date for an independent roundup here on the Powder. A roundup that would give men like himself a chance to brand their own cattle. He talked of nothing else ever since I arrived up here. Now he's dead."

"This ain't my fight, Miss. I don't own any land. I don't own any cattle. All my life I've fought somebody else's battles. Indians, and stage robbers, and cow thieves, and big ranchers! And what does it get me. A kick in the pants from the people I've tried to help. And the girl—"

He stopped. But he need not have worried. Miss Flagg was not listening. She was fingering the rifle, and looking off into distance.

"It's my fight!" she exclaimed in a tone that left no room to doubt her sincerity. "I won't run away! I'll bring in the man who murdered my brother."

"Just how will you go about this?"

"I'll go to Henrietta. I'll find the man who came here to the cabin. I'll swear a warrant for his arrest and see him hanged!"

Mattern admired her spunk. But he wagged his head. "Miss, the man you're lookin' for is Sheriff now. He'd enjoy the joke."

"Then you know who he is?"

Mattern shrugged. "There is an ex-sheriff, ex-Association killer around. He's about the only man who could have rustled up a sheriff's badge and false legal papers. And your description fits him. Miss, that man *is* the Sheriff, by now."

"Then I'll—I'll denounce him!"

Mattern was ironic. "You could try something like that. That's about what your brother tried. Averill and Watson tried something like that, too. They didn't get very far."

"But I—"

"Don't think bein' a woman will spare you, Miss. Ella Watson thought the same. They stood her on the edge of a cliff and tied a rope around her neck. They tied the other end to a tree, and pushed her off the ledge, and watched her strangle. They are pleasant characters you are dealin' with. There is not much they wouldn't do—to somebody who stands in their way."

Then, almost without knowing, he was speaking of another matter.

"From what you said, Miss, if none of the farmers know about your brother, then that meeting must be still scheduled for tonight."

The girl nodded absently.

"Then wait till tonight before you try anything. Maybe we can still organize that outfit."

We—?"

Her eyes swung to his and he saw the hope that leaped into them.

"I guess I've been wrong about you, Ernie," she said, unsteadily. "And I'm sorry. I guess you're everything Jim thought you were. And Ernie—don't call me 'miss.' My name is Molly."

Molly. Molly Flagg. Mattern tried the name on his tongue, and found it pleasing. He found the freckled oval face pleasing, too, and the hazel eyes.

IN THE light of a flickering bonfire outside the Flagg cabin that night the Pease County Stock Growers' Association was duly organized with seventy-one members present.

It was not easy sledding. The homesteaders had heard of Mattern's resignation and his flight, and they brought word that Strap Bowman had been appointed Sheriff.

News of the lynch-murder of Jim Flagg struck them close to their stomachs. Their suppers lay uneasily beneath their belts.

"There are more than seventy of you here tonight!" Mattern spoke out. "Finch Cohill can't send more than fifty men against you. Stand together and you can whip him."

"Cohill's men are professional killers," Sid Deaver protested. "They got no wives and kids."

"The more reason you should fight," Mattern replied. "The more reason you should win! You've something to fight for. Cohill's rannies have nothing."

"What you got to fight for, Mattern? What's your stake in this fuss? And what changed your mind about running?"

This was from Hog Leach, a thick, heavy-set dirt farmer. Leach had been shining around Molly Flagg like a schoolboy all evening. Ernie would not have admitted, even to himself, that he had noticed the farmer's awkward attentions to the girl. He would have vehemently denied that these overtures lessened his regard for the man. But he had been conscious of a deep-seated animosity for the man when their eyes first had touched, and that mutual if baseless antagonism had hardened with each contact since.

Mattern knew the farmer's question was a fair one. He knew he had no ground to resent it.

But he did resent it, and he resented the fact that he had no satisfactory answer to give. Somehow, he resented the fact that Molly Flagg was watching narrowly, waiting to hear what he'd say.

"Let's just say I got a bad deal and don't like it," he managed to say, keeping the anger he felt out of his voice. "Let's say Jim Flagg was my friend and I don't like what happened to him."

"But you run once when the heat was on," the farmer insisted. "How do we know you won't do the same again?"

This time Ernie failed to keep anger out of his tone.

"If it's doubts about my guts that are pestering you, Hog, why feel free to run any experiments you might have in mind. Log Cohill had doubts of the same. Log experimented and found out!"

Leach shook his head. "Someday I wouldn't mind runnin' that exper'ment. Right now I expect we got enough to fight without fighting each other. I'll take your guts for granted—for the time bein'."

Mattern's eyes made the round of the others at the fire.

"Any man here has the same privilege as offered Hog."

There was respect on the wind-scoured faces that watched Ernie in the firelight. Nobody came forward.

"If that's settled," Mattern said, "we'll go on to other things."

Leach was named president of the new association after Ernie had declined. Ernie was given the job of wagon boss.

Molly put herself forward for secretary and treasurer, and dared them not to accept her. As such, she wrote the charter, and secured the signature of every man present.

Mattern watched, grimly amused, seeing her bend them all to her purpose. He was remembering how he himself had been used by a scheming female, and he was glad to see that others were not immune.

The group set the date of their roundup within a week.

Then, when it was over and the crowd was breaking up, Mattern faced the girl in the cabin. The color was back in her cheeks, and the exertion and excitement of attaining the ends for which her brother had died filled her with a warmth of feeling that made her pleasing to behold.

"Miss Flagg," Ernie said bluntly, "you had better ride home with one of the men to a house where there is another woman."

He felt her inquiring glance. But he didn't turn.

"I'm not a schoolteacher any more, Mr. Mattern," she retorted. "I'm a homesteader. I intend to stay on my land."

"Suit yourself," he said sourly. "I'd thought I'd hang out up here. It's out of the way, and I had better keep out of sight until the roundup gets under way, or you might be wanting a new wagonboss. But if you insist, I'll move on."

"Move on?" There was genuine surprise in her voice. Then she laughed softly, and the sound needled him.

"Why should either of us move on, Mr. Mattern, if it's more convenient that we stay?"

She was smiling at him with gypsy impertinence.

"Are you afraid of me, Mister Mattern?" she inquired, sweetly ironic. "If you are, you needn't stay in the cabin. You can take your bedrool out to the stable."

She was laughing at him, he knew. She deserved to be taught a lesson.

He caught her in his arms and kissed her roughly. She did not struggle against him.

"That's why you had better go!" he told her, dropping his arms. But she didn't shrink from him, and she didn't slap him, and he felt a mounting conviction that she had wanted him to kiss her. The conviction aggravated his anger and left him feeling outgeneraled.

Mattern turned away.

V

THE WEEK that followed was a full one for Ernie Mattern. But hard work paid off, and on the day appointed for the Pease County Stock Growers' Roundup he was able to put ninety-six riders on the range outfitted with two hundred horses and eight wagons.

At dawn of the long-awaited day, all eight wagons rolled out onto the Powder River plains, racing for the choicer campsites on the forks of the Little Blue, ten miles out of Henrietta, where the first big hold of cattle would be made.

There was grumbling when Mattern robbed the victors of the fruits of victory by insisting that one big camp be made, with the wagons corraled pioneer fashion near the creek, the cooking fires inside the circle. There was near-rebellion when he ordered that rifle pits be dug beneath the wagons, and barricades thrown up in the intervals between.

Mattern was remembering lessons he had learned from some Indian skirmishes. But the farmers were alarmed by the warlike preparations, and resentful of the work entailed.

"This here is supposed to be a cow roundup, not a fall Indian campaign," Hog Leach spouted. "What you lookin' for to hit us, Ernie?"

"I'm lookin' for Finch Cohill to hit us. And when he does I want to be able to speak his own language. This is more than another shotgun roundup, Hog. This is showdown between us and Wheel. You can't be half-haunched, Hog, and win!"

Leach wagged his bullet head. "You can skip the speech-makin', Ernie. And if there's trouble, you can thank yourself. Cohill wouldn't have known about this till it started if you hadn't insisted on postin' signs all over the valley tellin' him about it."

"You can't keep a cow roundup secret," Mattern retorted. "The law requires that all roundups be advertised in advance, and we're staying within the law. Cohill can send reps to look after Wheel's interests if he wants. But they'll go by our rules."

"Once a Sheriff, always a Sheriff!" Molly Flagg interposed lightly, coming between them. "He's right, Hog, and we're lucky he's with us. You and the others act like you were committing a crime. Well, we're not. We're entirely within our rights as long as we don't abuse a privilege."

Leach stared at her, dumb as a dog in her presence. But Mattern didn't notice. The girl's words had planted the seed of

a scheme in his head. A scheme that was fantastic and improbable, yet capable of succeeding.

Throughout the remaining preparations, Leach was silent and sullen. He saw the play that Molly Flagg was making for Mattern and he didn't like it. He didn't trust Mattern, and he made no attempt to conceal that distrust.

"We'll work the canyons at the End of the Horn, first," Mattern told the assembled horsemen. "We'll ride out every canyon to its head between the Red Wall and Crazy Woman. Everything we pick up we'll push down here in the valley—Wheel stuff as well as your own. We'll hold 'em here till you've swept the canyons clean. Then we'll cut the Wheel stuff out, if Cohill don't send his reps, and get the brandin' done. Then we'll work the plains."

"How'll we ride, Ernie?" a homesteader named Click demanded.

"Fifty men will ride in crews of ten. Forty-six men will stay here to hold. Click, you'll take one crew. Harley Nate, you and Pringle and Beal and Ridge will take the others. Pick your country and your men. Stick together in twos and threes, and all ten within gunshot of each other.

"Two shots, evenly placed, will warn your buddies there is trouble comin'. Three shots will get you help. If you hear shootin' down here come a-flaggin'. But don't come in twos and threes to be knocked off. Assemble your outfits and come for business. You got all that?"

Every man nodded. Every man but one. Hog Leach hitched up his gun belt and shuffled forward.

"No job for me, eh, Ernie?" he said in a flat tone of enmity.

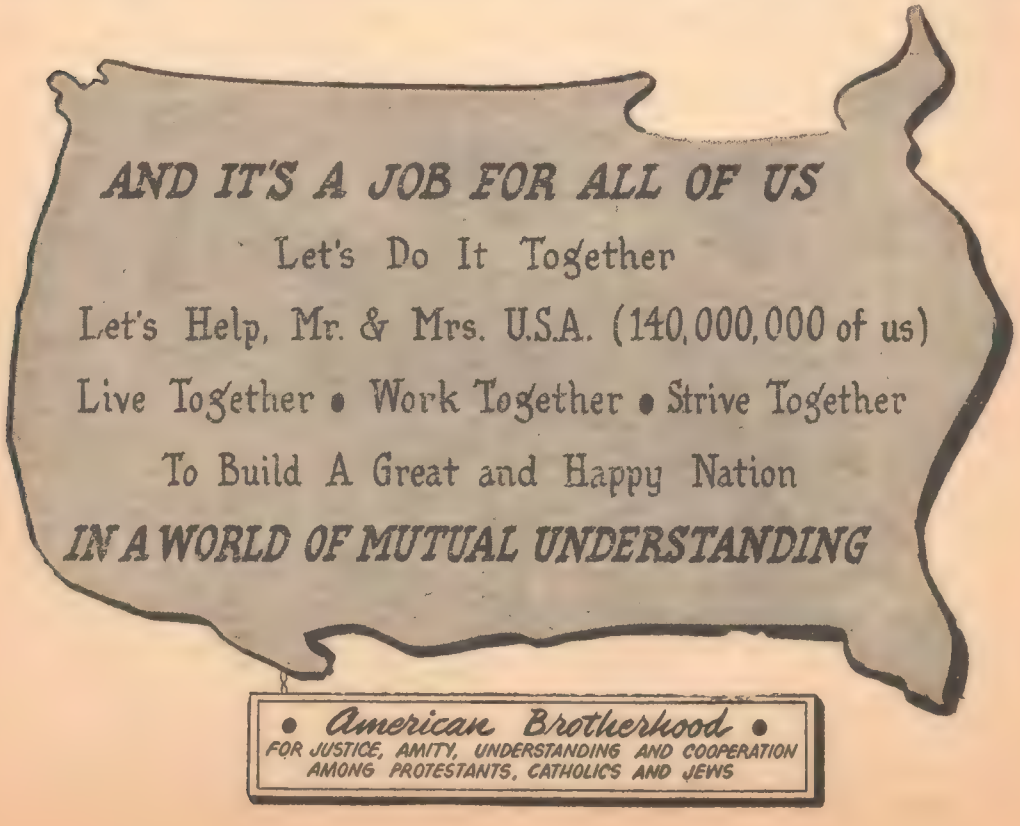
"I want you here with me and the wagons, Hog."

The farmer glowered. "I'm pres'dint of this outfit—"

"That's what you are," Ernie confirmed. "And when Cohill hits us, he is going to hit us here—to scatter the cows and burn our wagons. When that happens I want you beside me."

The five men appointed as crew bosses chose their men and rode for the hills. Mattern spoke to the others.

"You boys won't have any holding to do till we get some cows. You can drag us in some firewood if you want to eat. Then


AND IT'S A JOB FOR ALL OF US
Let's Do It Together
Let's Help, Mr. & Mrs. U.S.A. (140,000,000 of us)
Live Together • Work Together • Strive Together
To Build A Great and Happy Nation
IN A WORLD OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING
• American Brotherhood •
FOR JUSTICE, AMITY, UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION
AMONG PROTESTANTS, CATHOLICS AND JEWS

you better hit them rifle pits again.

"When we do get cattle to hold you'll work in two crews of twenty each. Bob Daly, you'll take the day shift. Hog, the night shift's yours. Twenty men apiece. That will leave us six men to cook and keep camp."

Leach spat and threw his hat to the ground.

"Ernie," he ground out, "if there's a dirty end of the stick, you hand it to me. What you tryin' to crowd me into?"

Mattern faced about slowly, feeling the eyes of Molly Flagg and everyone else watching him.

"I could say, Hog, that I look for Cohill to drop around to see us in the daylight, and that I'd like you in camp when he comes. You wouldn't believe that. So I'll put it another way.

"I'll put it this way, Hog. As long as I'm wagonboss I aim to run things without explainin' to you every time I spit.

"That's it, Hog. Get in or get out!"

"Okay, Ernie. You're the boss. And I'll git in. But I ain't shore what you're up to. Remember, I'll be watchin'."

Mattern let it pass. There was still work to be done. Horses had to be tended, the camp routine fixed, and a dozen other matters attended to. He sent a man into town to spy on Cohill and keep them posted on developments.

That night, when the riders had returned from the hills and all the camp was asleep but Hog Leach's night guard, he heard a step beside him, and turned to see Molly.

"You should get some sleep yourself, Mr. Mattern," she advised him. "You have been driving yourself hard this week. You'll need the rest."

Ernie's jaw came. "I've been lookin' after myself for twenty years, Miss Flagg. I reckon I can do the job."

The girl laughed. "Was she pretty, Mr. Mattern. And nice? The kind of a girl you need?"

"Who?" he blurted, taken off guard.

"This Mary Timberlake who disappointed you. I think I would like to shake her."

Mattern wondered what she had heard.

"Don't bother about Mary and me," he said dryly.

"You really should give yourself a chance to know other women," she insisted. "We are not all alike."

"You all talk alike!" Mattern snapped, turning over to go to sleep.

Ernie's prediction regarding Finch Cohill proved correct. He had allowed three days for the riders to work the mountain canyons to the west. On the fourth day they would begin to brand. And on the afternoon of the third day, the spy he'd sent to town galloped in on a lathering horse.

"They're a-coming, Ernie!" the sider sang out. "Strap Bowman, with sixty Wheel riders an' town bums, an' Finch Cohill. Strap has swore the whole bunch in as deputies. A whole damned Sheriff's army, Ernie! And enough artillery to fight the Sioux!"

Mattern received the news calmly. But the farmers had not really expected to fight, and the news that Cohill was coming in such force, backed by the law, was demoralizing. Mattern saw that his organization would shatter like glass on rock, if he permitted it.

"Laigs," he said, summoning one of the camp helpers, "jump on your horse and make a round of the herd. Tell the boys to come in on the lope."

"Yeah?" Leach demanded. "Then what in hell happens to the herd?"

MATTERN swung on the farmer. "Scattered cattle can be gathered again," he said. "Dead men can't be brought to life. Now, Leach, this is what I been savin' you for. Take over. Break out the Winchesters. Fifty rounds for every man. Scatter the men underneath the wagons and behind the barricades. We'll give Cohill a warm reception. A forty-six gun salute!"

Leach grinned, spat on his hands, and went about his work.

When the day herders came in Mattern ordered all the horses out of the camp, detailing four men to herd them back out of gunshot range.

"Suppose we want them horses to ride Cohill's sidewinders down with?" Leach demanded.

"We're not crowdin' this fight!" Mattern said. "We've jockeyed Cohill into opening the ball. We're only defendin' ourselves. If that's a crime I don't know my law!"

No man asked what they'd do if they needed the horses to escape. But the question was in everyone's mind. Mattern could see it on their faces, and he crowded the preparations, giving them no time to talk.

Behind a barricade, gripping a rifle, he found Molly.

"Get up behind one of the horse herders and ride out of this," he commanded. "It ain't women's business today."

"It's *this* woman's business!" she flared. "Cohill and his hired murderers killed my brother!"

Harsh words rose to Mattern's lips. But he shrugged them off. You couldn't tell a woman what was good for her.

His preparations had been completed when Cohill's force rode over a ridge and came slowly toward the camp, scattering the cattle as they came.

"Let 'em come within fifty yards," he told an adjutant. "Then drop a slug or two in front of them to slow 'em down. Don't shoot to kill till I give the word."

The cavalcade halted and three men rode forward. Strap Bowman was in the center, his freshly polished star gleaming in the sunlight. On one side of him rode Finch Cohill. On the other was Lobo Jones, the wolfer Ernie thought he had killed on Mary Timberlake's porch. Lobo carried one arm in a sling. A bloody rag swathed his head.

Bowman reined up twenty feet off and shifted the rifle on his pommel. "Boys," he called, "I'm Sheriff of this county, and this here is a legal posse. Who's directin' this shotgun roundup?"

Leach rose above the barricade, his rifle cocked in his hands.

"I'm pres'dint of the Pease County Stock Growers' Association. We are peaceable citizens engaged in lawful business. If you hombres have anything to say, can say it to me!"

"I'll talk to you, Hog. I've a blanket warrant here to arrest every man connected with this roundup. The charges are illegal gathering and marking of cattle.

"Now boys, I won't serve this paper if you all straddle your horses and ride for home. I'll use force to serve it if I have to."

Mattern heard the silence which fol-

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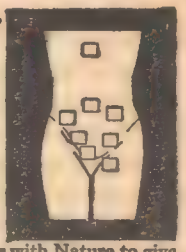
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DETECTIVE BOOK

lowed the Sheriff's threat. The homesteaders were outnumbered, and faced by professional killers. But they were dug in.

Mattern exposed himself and noted that his appearance was a shock to Cohill and Bowman. He had requested that the farmers keep his presence in the valley a secret, and he saw that they'd kept the secret well. The men in front of him had thought he was miles from the Powder, by now. They were looking at him in surprise and consternation.

"Your warrant's no good, Strap!" he called. "Your appointment's illegal. No man under indictment for murder can be appointed to public office. There ain't a Sheriff among you!"

"Under indictment for murder?" Bowman repeated.

Mattern turned to Molly Flagg. "Stand up Molly and look these citizens over. Tell us if you've ever seen any of them before."

The girl was quickly on her feet. She paled, seeing Bowman. Then she pointed a finger.

"That's the man who came to Jim's cabin wearing a Sheriff's star. He took my brother away."

"That does it, Strap. That ends your career as shotgun Sheriff. You're under arrest—for the murder of Jim Flagg!"

"*I'm* under arrest?" Bowman had recovered from his surprise sufficiently to smile. "Where do you get authority to make arrests?"

"Any citizen is authorized to arrest a law-breaker and hold him for prosecution. I've an eye-witness—and I'm exercisin' my right. Move and I'll shoot you."

Mattern brought up his gun as he spoke. Bowman did not move. It was Cohill who spoke next.

"That's the weakest bluff I've ever heard a man run, Mattern! Bowman is Sheriff of this county and you are impeding the course of justice—"

"Strap can't qualify to act as Sheriff," Mattern differed. "So, I guess that makes your deputies illegal, too. I'm holdin' Strap for trial. You can join this roundup, Finch, like you was invited to. But we won't take you gun-handies. And you'll live up to the rules of the roundup committee."

Cohill's eyes plunged into Mattern's like daggers.

"This is an illegal roundup! The law states that all roundups shall be supervised by the Stock Growers' Association—"

"But the law don't state which Stock Growers' Association," Mattern informed him. "This roundup is as legal as any of your own, Finch. And it's not breaking any law to defend yourself against an armed mob. I've given you a choice. You had better make it."

Cohill nodded. "I've made my choice. You want a shootout. You'll get a shootout! Come along, Strap."

He heeled his horse to ride off, and Bowman started to follow suit. Mattern cocked his rifle.

"Set where you are, Strap, or I'll take the pleasure of killing you!"

Bowman sat a moment in indecision. Then he relaxed and slackened his reins as if to dismount. But, instead, he clapped his spurs to his horse's flanks, jumping his gelding straight at Mattern. His rifle belched as he came. Ernie felt the heat of the slugs on his face.

Mattern returned the fire, jumping to one side as he fired. But concern for Molly interfered with his aiming. He knocked the girl behind the barricade with his elbow. But his own shot went wild and by the time he was ready to shoot again the guns of the homesteaders crashed together like thunder.

Bowman was hanging Indian fashion on the off-side of his pony, racing for safety. Mattern took quick aim and shot. The pony keeled high. Bowman hit the ground. Lobo Jones raced up to help Bowman.

MATTERN snapped a shot, missed, and before he could work the lever of his gun, Lobo had made his rescue. His next shot dropped the horse, and the two men came up like jackrabbits, zig-zagging for the safety of a nearby ravine. Mattern emptied his rifle at them, without scoring.

Old Finch Cohill, from the instant the first shot had been fired, had sat motionless on his horse in front of the barricade, daring the homesteaders to shoot him. His thin face was arrogant. But he made no move to join the fighting, and the farmers refused to shoot a sitting duck. They were concentrating their fire on the distant possemen, and their fire was taking its toll. Half a dozen horses were down, and more saddles were empty.

The possemen were returning the fire as best they could. But they were mounted and their horses were boogering. And their targets were sheltered by the barricade. Even as Mattern turned to take stock of the situation, the possemen were turning their horses and riding for the ravine which already sheltered Bowman and Lobo.

Finch Cohill had likewise witnessed the defeat of his forces. He seemed to see Mattern for the first time since the fight began. Snarling an oath, the cattle king hefted his rifle.

Mattern heard Molly call a warning, and whirled to find the old man's rifle trained on his head. He raised his pistol, knowing there wasn't time. Then a gun exploded at his side, and Cohill reeled and fell from the saddle.

Mattern turned to see Molly kneeling at his right, her smoking rifle still leveled across the barricade.

A FOUR-HORSE team suddenly emerged from the ravine in which the gunmen had taken refuge. Behind the horses was a high-bedded wagon with canvas-covered bow-top. The canvas was aflame, and the man on the seat up front whipped the horses to a frenzy, pointing them straight at the barricade.

As Mattern watched, the teamster tied his lines to the seat, whipped the team to a faster pace, and leaped from the flaming vehicle. The horses came on in a straight line for the wagon corral, wild-eyed and snorting.

"There's dynamite in that wagon!" someone trumpeted. The farmers stood paralyzed by the horror of their predicament.

Mattern picked up Molly's rifle and dropped the nearest horse.

The other three did not check. They came on, frothing and straining, pulling the dead animal along by its traces. But the drag of the down wheeler turned the remaining three in a wide circle, heading them back toward the ravine.

The farmers stopped running and started to cheering wildly as they saw how neatly Mattern had turned the posse's own weapon back upon them.

"Get down!" Mattern trumpeted. "Down to the ground before it goes off!"

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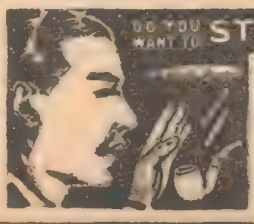

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A few of the farmers obeyed. But most of them stood or knelt, watching with relish as the Wheel gun-fighters scrambled from the ravine, on horse and on foot, fleeing madly from the death-chariot.

Then, just at the lip of the ravine, the wagon struck a boulder, careened, and disappeared in a vast cone-shaped sheet of yellow flame that lifted fragments of the horses and wagon high into the air. A split second later, a gust of searing hot air struck Mattern in the face, knocking him to the ground.

In the hollow, unnatural silence which followed, he heard the pounding of hoofs in the ground. He sat up stunned, and saw his roundup riders fanning out to round up the survivors of Bowman's posse.

VI

A CHECK-UP at the roundup camp when the surviving possemen had been corraled and tallied showed just how overwhelming the farmers' victory had been. Of the sixty killers who had moved against them, twenty were dead, ten were wounded, and another fifteen were captured, unharmed. Another fifteen were missing, Bowman and Lobo Jones among them. Some of these, Mattern knew, had gone up in the explosion and would not be found. But he knew that others of them had got away during the heat of the fight, or had escaped to the breaks where they would be difficult to root out.

"That's the tough hired gunfighter for you, men," he remarked, inclining his head in the direction of the cowed prisoners. "They're plenty tough when they're shootin' from behind a rock at a man who isn't armed. You face up to them with a gun of your own and they're not so hot for a fight."

"Especially not if they have Ernie Mattern to deal with!" Molly exclaimed. Ernie flushed.

"If we're handing out the bouquets," he told her, "you did pretty well yourself."

"You two can organize your mutual admiration society at a later date!" Leach growled. "What do we do now, Mr. Wagonboss? Rout the rest of Cohill's bunch out the rocks?"

Mattern shook his head. "They won't hurt anybody up in the rocks. But we better get the wounded and the dead into town. We'll turn 'em over to Milt to use in his campaign for governor. Then we'll see if maybe the board wouldn't like to resign in favor of a committee that can restore order up here."

"You think Milt would still buck us?" Leach demanded. Ernie laughed.

"Milt will never be Governor if he lets us get away with this. I expect he'll send to Cheyenne for troops quick as he hears what's happened. That's an idea, Daly. Better take your day-herd crew and ride to Indian Pass, just in case. When word of this fuss gets to the Governor, we want it to come from us!"

Arriving in town an hour before sundown Ernie talked with a livery-stable attendant and learned two important facts. Strap Bowman and Lobo Jones had reached town a short time ago, and had taken up position in the Cowman's Bar, expecting a siege. The county board was in emergency session in the jail office, debating a course of action to quell the farmers' revolt. The disinterested citizenry had either left town or were in their cellars, expecting the worst.

"We'll deal with Timberlake, first," Ernie decided. "Bowman will keep."

In front of the jail office he halted his long caravan of riders and prisoners, and the wagons containing the wounded and dead. He called on Leach and Molly and Charley Click to follow him as he stepped into the familiar gloom of the office he had used for a month.

He found three men waiting. He grinned at Milt Timberlake and came straight to the point.

"Howdy, Milt. You're looking poorly—and not as *neutral* as when I saw you last. Well, I brought you some campaign material. Five wagon loads of it. It's out front now waiting for you to claim it."

Timberlake glowered. "Ernie Mattern," he rasped, "I've heard all about what you've been up to today. And you'll have plenty time for regrets. A full report has gone to the Governor. There will be troops in here inside of a week—"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Milt," Ernie interrupted. "But Indian Pass is closed, and your word won't get through. When the Governor hears of this, he'll hear our side of it. And now, Milt, if you're still

inter-ested in remaining neutral in this fight, you can. You can all write out your resignations from the county board. We will witness them, as the succeeding board."

"Resignations?" Milt Timberlake choked on his breath and came to his feet, blowing through his nose. *"Succeeding board?"*

"You wanted to remain neutral, Milt!" Ernie reminded. "And there's about the only way you can do it now. The farmers want a government that will preserve order. We've organized a committee to take over. You can resign and walk out that door a free men. Or you can sit tight, and the committee will try you on charges of dereliction of duty and turning your authority over to a mob. The boys are in a killing mood, Milton. I'd recommend you resign."

Timberlake collapsed on his groaning chair. His eyes had sunk almost out of sight in his bloated face, and he sucked desperately for air. The mantle of spokesman fell upon Bill Clifford, who sputtered and choked himself.

"You won't get away with this, Mattern! This is open rebellion. I'm here to—"

"You're here to resign if you want to get out of this whole-skinned!" Mattern snapped. "Thanks to you three, every farmer in the valley has risked his neck these last few days doing the job they elected you to do. They'd like to handle you three the way they handled Cohill. In ten seconds I'll turn you over to them!"

One by one, the three men turned and looked out the window at the mounted crowd outside. One by one, they wrote their resignations, and skulked from the door. Mattern noted that all of them turned down the street in the direction of the Stockman's Bar. He called out after them.

"Tell Strap Bowman where he stands now. Tell him I will act as Sheriff under the new committee. Tell him he won't get away from me again!"

At Mattern's suggestion, the farmers named Leach and Click and Molly Flagg to the three-man board, with Leach filling Timberlake's position. In the first meeting of the body a few minutes later he outlined his ideas of what he thought their policies should be.

"First off, you had better send a report

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to the Governor on what happened up here. Miss Flagg can put it in English. Next you had better appoint someone to administer the Cohill estate since Finch left no heirs. Then you'll want a public lands committee to go into the land office records and find which of the Wheel acres belonged to Cohill, which he held outside of the law. Then see to it every foot that isn't deeded is opened up to homesteading."

He encountered no arguments there. And when these matters were settled, Leach brought up another question of policy.

"Sheriff, what you aimin' to do about Bowman and his pals down in the Stockman's Bar?"

Before Ernie could answer footsteps sounded on the walk outside. Lobo Jones filled the doorway, grinning uneasily. A white flag was tied to the end of his rifle.

"Another flag o' truce, Lobo?" Ernie demanded.

The wolfer spat on the floor with a hissing sound. "I'm arunnin' errands, Ernie, like I done oncet before. Now I'm talkin' for Strap Bowman. Strap says to say he's heard you want to see him on some very important bizness, an' if you do, why he's awaitin' for you in front of the Cowman's Bar, an' he hopes you'll come down right away on account of he don't want to be disappointed about not seein' you any more!"

Lobo then turned and left without waiting sound. "I'm a-runnin' errands, Erie, window and looked down the street. Bowman was there all right. He wore two guns, as usual. His eyes were on the Sheriff's office.

Mattern buckled on his own belt and started for the door. Molly blocked his path.

"You're not going out there? Not really!"

Mattern shrugged. "You think I'd pass up such a chance?"

"It's a trap!" the girl said vehemently. "You're willing to walk into it!"

"I don't think so," Mattern said. "The Texans with Strap wouldn't grieve to see me die. But I believe they got their fill of killing other folks' snakes."

"Don't never under-rate a Texican!" Leach put in. "Hell, Ernie, I can knock him off with a rifle from here. He's earned a killing. Why risk your neck?"

The farmer's voice was emphatic. But his eyes betrayed him. Leach knew, as Ernie knew, that there was no escaping it now.

Bowman had made it a personal thing. A man had to see it through.

Ernie hitched up his belt and started for the door. But Molly put out a hand to stop him.

"Ernie—Mr. Mattern! It's foolhardy and unnecessary and childish, and you know it! Why do you do it?"

Mattern looked at her, closely, for the first time in a week. He saw how closely she resembled her brother, and he had a vision of Jim Flagg's face as he last had seen it. Black and swollen, in a lynchman's noose. In Strap Bowman's noose.

He thought, for no reason at all, of the day they'd buried Jim Flagg. He heard the singing in the little cabin, around the plain pineboard casket. He saw the corpse inside there in the box, wrapped in a piece of canvas, to conceal the horrible countenance of death, as it had come to Jim Flagg.

He thought maybe that was why he had to go. But he wasn't certain. And he wouldn't bluff.

"Hog and the others wanted to know my reasons, when we organized the association," he told her. "I couldn't give them any. I can't give you any for this. All I know is I got no choice. Maybe Mary Timberlake was right. She says I'm a killer."

"And she lies!" the girl said fiercely. "You've saved a good many lives today!"

"I saved one too many, I reckon," Mattern said wearily. "I'll feel like a killer as long as Bowman lives."

MATTERN turned and stepped outside. The street ahead of him was free of humans except for Bowman.

Mattern didn't look directly at his enemy. An object blurs if you look at it too long.

When he was within twenty feet, he halted. Bowman spoke.

"So we finally get to it, eh, Ernie?"

"We finally get to it, Strap," Mattern agreed, triumphantly, as if he were winning an argument. "I've cornered you at

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last and made you fight. You've killed your last man, Mr. Bowman."

"The last, all but one. What the hell. I can't figure a guy like you. Killing has paid me. Paid me better than any work you've ever done. To that extent, I had a stake in this affair. What was your stake? I've even got reason to be out here in the road facin' you. I'm fighting for my life. What you fighting for, Ernie?"

"What's it matter, Strap, why I'm here? I *am* here. That's what counts."

Bowman nodded. "Yeah. That's what counts. You're here. And you're dead. I got ten men in the bar. Ten guns aimed at you, Mattern. Didn't you think o' that?"

"I thought of it," Ernie replied, making his voice loud enough to reach the men inside. "Maybe I thought a little better than you did, Strap. There are no charges against those men in there. When this is over they can all walk out free men and leave the country. Unless they mix in this. Why should they do your killing any longer, Strap?"

"You alwus did sound like a preacher," Bowman said. He still didn't offer to reach for his gun. But, as he spoke, his eyes slid toward a harness shop at Mattern's right. It was only an instant's faltering of his gaze. But it was so furtive and so quick that Mattern was warned.

Mattern fell sideways in the road, whiping out his pistol as he fell. A rifle spanged from the harness shop. Ernie's hat rolled in the dust. Then a louder explosion shook the building, and there was a tinkling of glass.

The instant Mattern moved, Bowman went for his own gun. He was shooting when Ernie hit the ground. His slugs kicked dust in Ernie's eyes, but Ernie steadied his pistol with both hands, and fired twice.

Bowman staggered and sagged, then tried to level his gun again. Ernie knocked the life out of him with another well-aimed slug.

As quick as his third shot had been fired, Mattern rolled to the sidewalk and ducked around the corner of the bar. He wondered why no more shots had come from the harness shop. Then he looked across the street and saw why.

Lobo Jones had fallen through the front window and was hanging suspended on the jagged glass. His head was a bloody patchwork.

Standing in the shop behind, in silhouette against the open door, was Hog Leach, a shotgun in his hands.

Ernie comprehended then that Hog had followed him from the office, behind the row of buildings, to back his play. Hog Leach, the man who coveted the girl who wanted Ernie Mattern. The man Mattern himself had almost killed on two different occasions.

"Thanks, Hog," he said simply, when the farmer had joined him at the side of the saloon.

"S'all right, Ernie!" Leach said. "For a man I ain't got any use for, I'd go a long ways for you. Only one thing I want made clear," he smiled. "You be good to Molly or you'll answer to me."

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